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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 3 No. 16

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Something very peculiar was happening on the colony planet. Nobody ever came back—not even the police.

A TOUCH OF NEANDERTHAL

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Chapter One

The corridors of the Department for Other Planets (Admin) were long, and the waiting that had to be done in them was long. K. D. Anderson clutched his blue summons card, leant uncomfortably against a partition wall, and hankered for the old days when even government departments were civilized enough to waste good space on waiting rooms.

When at last he was shown into an Investigator's office, his morale was down low. Nor was he reassured by the sight of the Investigator, who looked almost viciously commonplace.

" I'm Investigator Parsons, in charge of the Nehru II case. We summoned you here because we are confidently expecting you to help us."

" Of course I will give such help as I can," Anderson said, " but I assure you I know nothing about Nehru II. Opportunities for space travel for civilians are very limited—almost non-existent—nowadays."

" You think so ? Then you will be interested to know you are being sent to Nehru II shortly."

Anderson stared in amazement at the little man. The latter's insignificant face was so blank it seemed possible he was not even getting a sadistic thrill out of springing this shock on Anderson.

" I'm a prehistorian at the institute," Anderson protested. " My work is research. I know nothing at all about Nehru II."

" Nevertheless you are classified as a Learned Man, and as such you are paid by World Government. They have a legal right to send you wherever they wish. As for knowing nothing about the planet Nehru, there you attempt to deceive me. One of your old tutors, Dr. Curtis-Harris, as you are aware, went there to settle some years ago."

Anderson sighed. He had heard of this sort of business happening to others—and had kept his fingers crossed.

" And what has Curtis-Harris to do with it ?" he asked.

" You are going to Nehru to find out what has happened to him for us. Your story will be that you are dropping in for old time's sake. You have been chosen because you were one of his favourite pupils."

Bringing out a cigarette packet, Anderson lit one without offering his opponent one.

" Is Curtis-Harris in trouble ?"

"There is some sort of trouble on Nehru II," the Investigator agreed cautiously. " You are going in order to find out just what sort of trouble it is."

" Well, I'll have to go if I'm ordered, of course. But I still can't see why you want to send me. If there's trouble, send a police ship."

The Investigator smiled.

" We've already lost two police ships there. That's why we're going to send you. You might call it a new line of approach, Mr. Anderson."

The track curved and began to descend into a green valley. Swettenham's settlement, the only town on Nehru II, lay dustily in one loop of a meandering river. As the bonnet of his tourer dipped, K. D. Anderson felt the heat increase ; it was cradled in the valley like water in the palm of the hand.

Just as he started to sweat, something appeared in the grassy track ahead of him. He jammed on the brakes and stared in amazement.

A small animal faced him.

It stood some two feet six high at the shoulder ; its coat was thick and shaggy, its four feet clumsy ; its long ugly skull supported two horns, the anterior being over a foot long. When it had looked its fill at Anderson, it lumbered into a bush and disappeared.

" Hey !" Anderson called.

Flinging open the door, he jumped out, drew his stun-gun and ran into the bushes after it. He reckoned he knew a baby woolly rhinoceros when he saw one.

The ground was hard, the grass long. The bushes extended down the hill, growing in clumps. The animal was disappearing round one of clumps. Directly he spotted it, Anderson plunged on in pursuit. No interplanetary prehistorian worth his salt would have thought of doing otherwise: these beasts were presumed as extinct on Nehru II as on Sol III.

He ran on. The woolly rhino—if it was a woolly rhino—had headed towards Swettenham's settlement. There was no sign of it now.

Two tall and jagged boulders, twelve feet high and disintegrating slowly, stood at the bottom of the slope. Baffled now his quarry had disappeared, proceeding more slowly, Anderson moved towards the boulders. As he went he classified them almost unthinkingly : impacted siltstone, deposited here by the glaciers which had once ground down this valley.

He rounded the nearest boulder.

A great glaring face thrust itself up at his. Sloe-black eyes peered from their twin caverns, a club whirled, and his stun-gun was knocked spinning.

Gasping with surprise, Anderson jumped back. He dropped into a defensive position, but his attacker showed no sign of following up his initial success. That was fortunate. Beneath the man's tan shirt, massive biceps and shoulders bulged. His jaw was pugnacious, not to say prognathous ; altogether a tough hombre, Anderson thought. He took the conciliatory line, his baby rhino temporarily forgotten.

" I wasn't after you," he said. " I was chasing an animal. It must have surprised you to see me appear suddenly with a gun, huh ?"

" Huh ?" echoed the other. He hardly looked surprised. Reaching out a hairy arm, he grabbed Anderson's wrist.

" You coming to Swettenham," he said.

" I was doing just that," Anderson agreed angrily, pulling back. " But my car's up the hill with my sister in it, so if you'll let go I'll rejoin her."

" Bother about it later. You coming to Swettenham," the tough fellow said. He started plodding determinedly towards the houses, the nearest of which was only a hundred yards or less away. Humiliated, Anderson had to follow. To pick an argument with this dangerous creature in the open was unwise. Marking the spot where his gun lay, he moved forward with the hope that his reception in the settlement would be better than first signs indicated.

It wasn't.

Swettenham settlement consisted of two horse-shoe-shaped lines of bungalows and huts, one inside the other. The outer line faced outwards onto the meandering half-circle of river ; the inner and more impressive line faced inwards onto a large and dusty square where a few trees grew. Anderson's captor brought him into this square and gave a call.

The grip on his arm was released only when fifteen or more men and women had sidled out and gathered round him, staring at him in curious fashion without comment. None of them looked bright. Their hair grew long, generally drooping over low foreheads. Their lower lips generally protruded. Some of them were near nude. Their collective body smell was offensively strong.

" I guess you don't have many visitors on Nehru II these days," Anderson said uneasily.

By now he felt like a man in a bad dream. His space craft was a mile away over two lines of hills, and he was heartily wishing himself a mile away in it. What chiefly alarmed him was not so much the hostility of these people as their very presence. Swettenham's was the only Earth settlement on this otherwise empty planet : and it was a colony for intellectuals. This crowd, far from looking like eggheads, resembled apes.

" Tell us where you come from," one of the men in the crowd said. " Are you from Earth ?"

" I'm an Earthman—I was born on Earth," said Anderson, telling his prepared tale. " I've actually just come from Trotsky's Planet, stopping in here on my way back to Earth. Does that answer your question ?"

"Things still bad on Earth?" a woman enquired of Anderson. She was young. He had to admit he could recognise a sort of beauty in her ugly countenance.

" There is peace on Earth," Anderson said defensively. " Universal peace has reigned there for forty years, ever since the All-Nation Charter of 2062 was signed. Now I daresay you all have a load of questions you want to ask about the home planet. I'll feel more disposed to answer them when I've been directed to the man I came to Nehru to visit, Dr. Albert Curtis-Harris. Will someone kindly show me his dwelling ?"

This caused some discussion. At least it was evident the name Curtis-Harris meant something to them, Anderson thought with relief.

" The man you want will not see you yet," someone announced.

" Direct me to his house and I'll worry about that. I'm an old pupil of his. He'll be pleased to see me. "

They ignored him for a fragmentary argument of their own. The hairy man who had caught Anderson—his fellows called him Ell—repeated vehemently, " He's a Crow !"

" Of course he's a Crow," one of the others agreed. " Take him to Menderstone."

That they spoke Universal English was a blessing. It was slurred and curiously accented, but quite unmistakable.

" Do you mean Stanley A. Menderstone ?" asked Anderson with sudden hope. The literary critic had certainly been one of Swettenham's original group that had come to form its own intellectual centre in these wilds.

" We'll take you to him," Ell's friend said.

They seemed reluctant to trade in straight answers, Anderson observed. He wondered what his sister Kay was doing, half expecting to see her drive the tourer into the settlement at any moment.

Seizing Anderson's wrist—they were a possessive lot—Ell's friend set off at a good pace for the last house on one end of the inner horseshoe. The rest of the crowd moved back into convenient shade. Many of them squatted, formidable, content, waiting, watching. Dogs moved between huts, a duck toddled up from the river, flies circled dusty excreta.

Nor did the Menderstone place look inviting. It had been built long and low some twenty years past. Now the concrete was all cracked and stained, the steel frame windows rusting, the panes of glass themselves as bleary as a drunkard's stare.

Ell's friend went up to the door and kicked on it. Then he turned without hurry or sloth to go and join his friends, leaving Anderson standing on the step.

The door opened.

A crafty man stood there, the old-fashioned rifle in his hands reinforcing his air of enormous self-sufficiency. His face was as brown and pitted as the bottom of a junk ; he was bald, his forehead shone as if a high polish had just been applied to it. Although probably into his sixties, he gave the impression of having looked just as he did now for the last twenty years.

Most remarkably, he wore lenses over his eyes, secured in place by wires twisting behind his ears. With a twinge of pride, Anderson recalled the name for this primitive apparatus: spectacles. Now that skilled batesmen could remedy any eye trouble in a month, spectacles were as dated as the phlogiston theory.

" Have you something you wish to say or do to me ?" demanded the bespectacled man, impatiently wagging his rifle.

" Oh, I'm sorry. Er . . . my name's K. D. Anderson. Your friends suggested I came to see you."

" My what ? Friends ? If you wish to speak to me you'd better take more care over your choice of words for a start."

" Mr. Menderstone—if you are Mr. Menderstone—choosing words is at present the least of my worries. I should appreciate hospitality and a little help."

" You must be from Earth or you wouldn't ask a complete stranger for such rare things. *Alice* !"

This last name was bawled back into the house. It produced a sharp-featured female countenance which looked over Menderstone's shoulder like a parrot peering from its perch.

" Good afternoon, madam," Anderson said, determinedly keeping his temper. " May I come in and speak to you for a while ? I'm newly arrived on Nehru."

"Good God! The first 'good afternoon' I've heard in a life time," the woman answering to the name of Alice exclaimed. " You'd better come in."

" *I* decide who comes in here," Menderstone snapped, elbowing her back.

" Then why didn't you decide instead of dithering on the step ? Come *in*, young man."

As Menderstone's rifle barrel reluctantly swung back enough to allow Anderson entry, the prehistorian took this as a mutual invitation and walked in. Alice led him through into a large miscellaneous room with a stove at one end, a bed at the other and a table between.

Chapter Two

Not wishing to appear to snoop, Anderson only took a brief glance round before focussing his attention on his host and hostess. They were an odd pair. Seen here close to, Menderstone looked less large than he had done on the step, yet the impression of a formidable personality was more marked than ever. Strong personalities were rare these days ; Anderson decided he might even like the man if he would curb his hostility.

As it was, Alice seemed more approachable. Considerably younger than Menderstone, she had a good figure. Her bird-like face tilted on one side, she was examining Anderson with interest, so he addressed himself to her. Which proved to be a mistake.

" I was just about to tell your husband that I stopped by to see an old friend and teacher of mine, Dr. Curtis-Harris—"

Menderstone never let Anderson finish.

" Now you have sidled in here, Mr. K. D. Anderson, you'd be advised to keep your facts straight. Alice is not my wife ; ergo, I am not her husband. We just live together, there being nobody else in Swettenham more suitable to live with."

" Mr. Anderson and I both would appreciate your leaving yourself out of this for a while," Alice said pointedly. Turning to Anderson, she motioned him to a chair and sat down on another herself. " I take it you have little idea of what goes on on Nehru II ?" she asked.

" I can see that something strange goes on," he said dazedly. " Swettenham's hardly what I expected . . ."

" No discussons of Kant, calculus or copulation, eh ?" Menderstone commented acidly.

Alice said : " You expected to be greeted by brains rather than apes ?"

" That's rather it, yes. I thought there was nothing here but an intellectual coterie."

" What do you know about Curtis-Harris ?"

Anderson gestured impatiently.

" You're very kind to have me in, Mrs.—ma'am, I mean, but can we talk some other time ? You see, I mainly need advice. I've a tourer parked back up the hill with my sister Kay waiting in it for me to return. I want to know if I can get there and back without being waylaid by these ruffians outside."

Alice and Menderstone looked at each other. A deal of meaning seemed to pass between them. After a pause, unexpectedly, Menderstone thrust his rifle forward.

" Take this," he said. " Nobody will harm you if they see this in your hand. Get your car and your sister and come back here."

" Well thanks, thanks a lot, but I have a revolver. When I pick it up—"

" Carry my rifle. They know it ; they respect it. But bear this in mind—you're in a damn sight nastier spot than you imagine as yet. Don't let anything—*anything*—deflect you from getting straight back here. Then you'll listen to what we have to say."

This speech was far from reassuring. Anderson stood up and took the rifle. It was heavy and slightly oiled, without a speck of dust on it, unlike the rest of the house. For some obscure reason, the feel of it alarmed him.

" How do you mean, nasty spot ?" he asked.

Alice was watching him intently.

" I'll ask you my question again," she said. " What do you know about Curtis-Harris ?"

" Well . . . He discovered a prehistoric skull in Brittany, France, back in the eighties. By current theories, the skull should have been seventy five thousand years old, but RCD and other dating methods made it only about a thousand years old. Curtis-Harris lost a lot of face over it academically : people felt he had been made a fool of in some way. He retired from teaching—I was one of his last pupils—and became very solitary. When he gave up everything to work on an obscure and eccentric theory of his own, the government naturally disapproved."

" Ah, the old philosophy : ' Work for the common man rather than the common good,' " sighed Menderstone, irrelevantly, Anderson thought.

" As he was on the professions roll as Learned Man, Curtis-Harris was paid by world government," he explained. " Naturally they expected results from him."

" Naturally," agreed Menderstone. " Their sort of results."

" Anyhow, when he got a chance to join Swettenham's newly formed colony here, he seized the opportunity to come. I take it you both know him ? How is he ?"

" I suppose one would say he is still alive," Menderstone said.

" But he's changed since you knew him," Alice said, and she and Menderstone laughed.

" I'll go and get my tourer," Anderson said, not liking them or the situation one bit. Cradling the rifle under his right arm, he went out into the square. The sun was so hot it filled the shadows with splodges of red and grey. Behind the splodges, in front of the creaking houses of Swettenham, the people of Swettenham squatted or leaned.

Keeping his eye on them, Anderson moved off, heading for the hill. Nobody attempted to follow him. A haphazardly beaten track led up the slope, its roughness emphasising the general neglect.

Anderson's anxiety got the better of his dignity. He ran up the track calling " Kay, Kay !"

No answer.

Breasting the slope, he passed the point where the woolly rhinoceros had stood. His vehicle was where he had left it. It was empty.

He ran to it, silenced. He ran round it. He began shouting his sister's name again. She did not reply.

Checking the panic he felt, Anderson looked out for footprints, but could find none. Kay was gone. Yet there was nowhere on the whole planet to go *to*, except Swettenham.

On sudden impulse he ran down to the two boulders where he had met Ell. They stood deserted and silent. When he had retrieved his revolver from where it had fallen, he turned back. He trudged grimly up to the tourer again, his shirt sticking to his spine. Climbing in, he switched on and coasted down into the settlement.

In the square he braked and jumped down, confronting the chunky bodies in the shadows.

" Where's my sister ?" he shouted to them. " What sort of funny business are you playing at ?"

Someone answered one syllable, croaking it into the brightness : " Crow !"

In a rage, Anderson aimed the rifle over the low roof tops and squeezed the trigger. The weapon recoiled with a loud explosion. Visible humanity upped onto its flat feet and disappeared into hovels or back streets.

Anderson went over to Menderstone's door, banged on it, and walked right in. Menderstone was eating a peeled apple and did not cease to do so when his guest entered.

" My sister has been kidnapped," Anderson said. " Where are the police ?"

" The nearest police are on Earth," Menderstone said between bites. " There you have a big police state stretching from pole to pole. ' Police on Earth, goodwill towards men.' Here on Nehru we have only anarchy. My advice to you, which I proffer in all seriousness, is to beat it back to your little rocket ship and head for home without bothering too much about your sister."

" Look here, Menderstone, I'm in no mood for your sort of cold cheek. Who's in charge round here ? What about this egghead camp ? Does that have any say in local matters ?"

Menderstone put his apple down and advanced, still chewing. His big face was as hard and cold as an undersea rock.

" Give me that rifle," he said, laying a hand on the barrel and tugging. He flung it onto the table. " Don't talk big to me, K. D. Anderson. I happen to loathe the regime on Earth and all the pipsqueaks like you it spawns. If you need help, see you ask politely."

" I'm not asking you for help."

" Then you'd better," Alice said. She had come in and stood behind Menderstone, her parrot's beak nose on one side as she regarded Anderson. " Stanley *is* the egghead camp nowadays. This was its old HQ. But all the other bright boys have gone to join your pal Curtis-Harris over the river."

" I can quite see why they didn't want you two with them," Anderson said sourly.

Menderstone burst into laughter.

" Well said, although in actuality you don't see at all."

" Go ahead and explain then."

Menderstone resumed his apple, his free hand thrust into a trouser pocket.

" Do we explain to him, Alice ? Can you tell yet which side he'll be on ? A high N-factor in his make-up, wouldn't you say ?"

" He could be a Crow. More likely an Ape, though, I agree. Hell, whichever he is, he's a relief after your undiluted company Stanley."

" Don't start making eyes at him, you cow. He could be your son !"

" What was good enough for Jocasta is good enough for me," Alice cackled. Turning to Anderson, she said, " You'd best put up here with us for the night. At least they aren't cannibals outside—they won't eat your sister. There must be a reason for kidnapping her, so if you sit tight they'll get in touch with you when they feel like it."

After further argument, Anderson agreed with what she suggested. Menderstone thrust out his lower lip and said nothing.

The remainder of the daylight hours passed uneasily. After he had unloaded his kit from the tourer and stacked it indoors, Anderson had nothing to do. The enforced idleness told on his nerves ; he tried to make Alice tell him something of the situation on Nehru II, but she was not informative. Only over supper, taken as the sun sank, did she cast some light on what was happening by discussing her arrival on the planet.

" I used to be switchboard operator and assistant radiop on a patrol ship," she said. " This was five years ago. We set down in a valley two miles south of here. The ship's still there, though they do say a landslide buried it last winter. None of the crew went back to it once they had visited Swettenham."

" Keith doesn't want to hear your past history," Menderstone said, using Anderson's first name contemptuously.

" What happened to the crew ?" Anderson asked.

She laughed harshly.

" They got wrapped up in your friend Curtis-Harris's way of life, shall we say. They became converted . . . All except me. And since I couldn't manage the ship by myself, I also had to stay here."

" How lucky for me, dear," said Menderstone with heavy mock-tenderness. " You're just my match, aren't you ?"

Alice jumped up, sudden tears in her eyes.

" Shut up, you—toad ! You needn't remind me what a bitch you've turned me into," she said. And with that she turned and left the room.

" Shall we divide what she has left of her supper between us ?" Menderstone asked, unmoved.

Disgust overcoming his natural diffidence, Anderson also stood up.

" What she called you was an understatement," he growled, " judging by what little I've seen."

" Do you imagine I enjoy this life ? Or her ? Or you, for that matter ?"

This stormy personal atmosphere obscured the larger tension until bedtime. A bitter three-cornered silence was maintained until Menderstone had locked Anderson into the other part of the house. Fortunately he had blankets with him, which he spread over the mouldy camp bed provided. He did not investigate the rooms adjoining his ; they had been used when the intellectual group was flourishing but now were deserted.

Tired though Anderson was, directly his head was flat he began to worry about Kay and the general situation. Could his sister possibly have had any reason for returning on foot to the ship ? He turned over restlessly.

Something was watching him through the window.

In a flash Anderson was out of bed and at his revolver, his heart hammering. The darkness outside was almost total. He glimpsed only a brutal silhouette in which eyes gleamed, and then it was gone.

At once he saw his foolishness in accepting Alice's laisser-faire advice to wait until Kay's captors got in touch with him. He must have been crazy to agree. Whatever was happening here, it was nasty enough to endanger Kay's life without any messenger boys arriving first to parley about it.

The woman had said that Curtis-Harris lived over the river. If he were as much the key to the mystery as he seemed to be, then he should be confronted as soon as possible. Thoroughly roused, angry, anxious, Anderson went over to the window and opened it.

He could see nobody about. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could discern nearby features well enough. A bright star in the sky that he took to be Bose, Nehru II's little moon, lent a faint light. Swinging his leg over the sill, Anderson dropped to the ground.

Everywhere was quiet. Making his way between the outer circle of houses, gun in hand, Anderson came to the river's edge. A sense of the recklessness of what he was doing assailed him, but he pressed on.

Pausing now and again to ensure he was not being followed, he moved along the river bank, avoiding the obstacles with which it was littered. He reached a bridge of a sort. A tall tree had been felled so that it lay across the stretch of water. Its underside was lapped by the river.

Anderson tucked his gun away and crossed the crude bridge with his arms outstretched for balance.

Chapter Three

On this far side, a number of crude attempts at cultivating the ground had been made. Their untidy patch-work died out as the upward slope of the land became more pronounced. No dwellings were visible.

More than instinct led Anderson on. He could hear a faint and indescribable choric noise ahead. And on higher ground a patch of light was now vaguely distinguishable.

This light grew with the sound. Circumnavigating a thorny mass of bush, Anderson could see that there was a depression ahead of him in the rising valley slope. Something was going on there. He ran for the last few yards, doubled up, with his revolver ready again.

On the lip of the depression, he flung himself flat and peered down into the dip.

A fire was burning in the middle of the circular hollow. Round it some two dozen figures paraded, ringing two men. One of these men was a menial, throwing powder into the blaze. The other, it was instantly apparent, had some sort of priestly role. Unlike all the others, who were naked, he wore a cloak and a pointed hat.

He sang and waved his arms. The dancers—if their crude shuffle could be called a dance—responded with low cries. The total effect, if not beautiful, was oddly moving.

Hypnotised, Anderson watched. There was no sign of Kay here, as he had half-anticipated. But by his carrot-coloured beard and his prominent nose the priest was distinguishable even in this uncertain light. It was Curtis-Harris.

Or it had been Curtis-Harris. Items that most easily identify a man to his friends are his stance and his walk. Curtis-Harris's had changed. He seemed to sag at the knees and shuffle now. Yet the high timbre of his voice remained unaltered, though he called out in a language unknown to Anderson.

The dancers shuffled eagerly, clapping their hands or nodding their shaggy heads. Gradually it dawned on Anderson what they looked like. Beyond doubt they were the inhabitants of Swettenham. They were also, almost unmistakeably, pre-human. They were pre-historic ; in particular, Neanderthal.

Mingled repulsion and elation rooted Anderson to the spot where he lay. Yes, unarguably the faces of Ell and his friends earlier had borne the touch of Neanderthal.

He lay in a trance of wonder, to become abruptly aware the dance had stopped. Now all the company turned to face the spot where he lay concealed. Curtis-Harris lifted an arm and pointed towards him. Then in a loud voice he cried out, all the crowd calling with him.

" Aigh murg eg neggy oggy Kay bat doo !"

The words were for Anderson.

They were unintelligable to him, yet they seemed to penetrate him. That his whereabouts was known meant nothing beside an even greater pressure on his brain. His whole being trembled on the threshold of some great disastrous revelation.

Anderson was literally not himself. The meaningless words seemed to shake him to his soul. Gasping, he got himself up and took himself off at a run. There was no pursuit.

He had no memory of getting back to Menderstone's place, no recollection of crossing the rough bridge, no recollection of tumbling through the window. He lay panting mindlessly on his blankets, his face buried in the pillow.

This state in its turn was succeeded by a vast restlessness. He could not sleep. Sleep was beyond him. The night seemed to stretch on for ever.

At last he sat up. A faint dawn light washed the world. Taking a torch from the kit piled by his bedside, he went to investigate the other empty rooms next to his.

A dusty corridor led to them.

Obviously this had been, as Alice had said, the HQ of Swettenham's original intellectual coterie. There was a library here with racked spools gathering dust ; Anderson did not trouble to read any titles. Another room was a small committee chamber. Maps hung on the walls, meaningless, silent.

A third room was a recreation room. It held a curious assortment of egghead toys. There was even a model electric railway of the type fashionable on Earth a couple of centuries ago. A lathe in the corner suggested much of it had been made on the premises.

Anderson peered at the track. It gleamed in the torchlight. No dust on it.

A length of siding raised itself like a snake's head. Coiling up, it wrapped round Anderson's wrist. He pulled at it, yelling in surprise. The whole layout reared up, struggling to get at him.

He backed away. The track writhed and launched itself at him, scattering wagons and locomotives. He fired his revolver

wildly. Loops of railroad fell over him, over his head, wrapping itself madly round him.

Anderson fell to the floor, dropping his gun, dropping the torch, tearing at the thin bands of metal. It threshed savagely, binding his legs together. He was shouting incoherently.

As he struggled, Menderstone ran into the room, the rifle in his hand, Alice behind him. It was the last thing Anderson saw as he lost consciousness.

When at last he roused, it was to find himself in Menderstone's living room on a bunk. Alice sat by him, turning towards him as he stirred. Menderstone was not there.

" Oh, my God . . ." Anderson groaned. His brain felt curiously lucid, as if a fever had just left him.

" It's time you woke up. I'll get you some soup if you can manage it," Alice said.

" Wait, Alice. Alice . . ." His lips trembled as he formed the words. " I haven't got a sister called Kay. I haven't a sister at all. I was an only child."

She was unsurprised.

" I guessed as much. When you brought all your kit in from your tourer there was nothing female among it."

" My mind. I was so sure . . . I could have pictured her, described her . . . And yet if anyone—if you'd challenged me direct, I believe I'd have known it was an—an illusion."

He sank down confusedly, closing his eyes, muttering. " *Aigh murg eg neggy oggy Kay bat doo* . . . That's what they told me on the hillside : you have no sister called Kay. Alice, it's so strange . . ."

His hand sought hers and found it. It was ice cold.

" Your initial is K, Keith," she said, pale at the lips. " You were out there seeking yourself."

Her face looking down at him was seared and ugly ; yet a sort of gentle patience in it dissolved the ugliness.

" Tell me I'm not mad," he whispered.

" Of course you're mad !" Menderstone said, as he burst open the door. " Let go of his hand, Alice—this is our beloved home, not the cheap seats in the feelies on Earth. Anderson, if you aren't mad, why were you rolling about on the floor, foaming at the mouth and firing your damned gun, at six o'clock this morning ?"

Anderson sat up.

" Explain it how you will, you saw me entangled in that jinxed railroad when you found me. Another few minutes and it would have squeezed the life out of me."

Menderstone looked genuinely puzzled. It was the first time Anderson had seen him without the full armour of his self-assurance.

" The model railroad ?" he said. " It was undisturbed. You hadn't touched it."

" It touched me," Anderson said chokingly. " It—it attacked me. You must have peeled it off me before bringing me through here."

" I see," Menderstone said, his face grim.

He nodded slowly, sitting down absentmindedly, and then nodding again to Alice.

" You see what this means, woman ? His N-factor is rising to domination. This young man is not on our side, as I suspected from the first. He's no Crow. Anderson, your time's up here. From now on you're one of Curtis-Harris's men. You'll never get back to Earth."

" What do you mean, Menderstone ?"

" As usual, neither more nor less than I say. Earth has lost another of her estimable nonentities."

" Menderstone, you really are crazy ; you're eaten up with hatred. You hate this planet, you hate Earth."

Menderstone stood up again, putting his rifle down on the table and coming across to Anderson with his fists bunched.

" Does that make me crazy, you little nincompoop ? I could give you fifty good cold hard reasons why I loathe the regime on Earth, but the chief one is this. For the first time ever, the whole globe is under one government. So scared is it of its various departments breaking down into the old nation-system again that it forms itself into the most authoritarian system ever devised. Even petty little scholars like you are brought up and indoctrinated.

" Yet is all this really revolutionary ? No. It's the culmination of a process that's been going on for centuries: the growth of bigger, stronger units of power. You can trace it to the medieval manors and back beyond that. And what's it all mean ? It means that civilization is always afraid of itself, because it always tries to destroy itself.

" Why should it try to do that ? Every wise man in history has asked why. None of them found the answer until your pal

Curtis-Harris tumbled on it, because they were all looking in the wrong direction. So the answer lies hidden here where nobody on Earth can get at it, because no-one who arrives goes back. *I* could go back, but I don't because I prefer to think of them stewing in their own juice."

" I'm going back," Anderson said. " I'm going to collect Curtis-Harris and I'm going back right away."

Menderstone laughed.

" Like to bet on it ? But don't interrupt when I'm talking, K. D. Anderson. Listen to something worth listening to, while you have the chance."

" Stop bellowing, Stanley," Alice said.

" Silence, female ! Attend ! Do you need proof that fear-ridden autocrats rule Earth ? They have a faster than light drive on their hands, they discover a dozen habitable planets within easy reach : what do they do ? They keep them uninhabited. Having read just enough history to frighten them, they guess that if they establish colonies those colonies will rebel against them. Swettenham was an exceptional man. How he pulled enough strings to get us here I'll never know. But this little settlement—far too small to make a real colony—was an exception to point to a rule : that the ruling regime is pathologically anti-life."

Anderson stood up, preparing for trouble.

" Talk your head off, Egghead," he said. " I'm getting out of here."

Menderstone's reaction was unexpected.

" Suit yourself, lad. Here's your revolver. Pick it up and go."

Pulling Anderson's gun out of his pocket, he flung it at his feet. Anderson stooped to pick it up. The short barrel gleamed dully. Suddenly it looked—alien, terrifying. He straightened, baffled, leaving the weapon on the floor.

Sympathy and pain crossed Alice's face as she saw his expression. Even Menderstone relaxed.

" You won't need it where you're going," he said, almost gently. "I'm sorry it turned out this way, Anderson. The long and tedious powers of evolution force us to be antagonists."

Uncomprehendingly, Anderson passed out of the room. Mighty relief surged through him as he emerged into the shabby sunshine. He stood relaxedly in the middle of the square, sagging slightly at the knees, letting the warmth soak

into him. Other people passed in ones or twos. A couple of strangely adult-looking children stared at him.

Yet he felt none of the hostility he had imagined yesterday. After all, these folk never saw a stranger from one year to the next; it was natural they should have crowded round him. No one had offered him harm—even Ell had a right to act to protect himself when a stranger charged round a rock at him carrying a gun. When his presence had been divined on the hillside last night, they had offered him nothing more painful than truth.

Gently, he started walking. He knew he needed a lot of explanations; he even grasped that he was in the middle of an obscure process which had still to be worked out. But at present he was content just to exist, to *be* and not to think.

Vaguely, the idea of going to see Curtis-Harris occurred to him.

He crossed the tree trunk bridge without effort, and walked along the other bank of the river. A few women picked idly at vegetable plots. Anderson stopped to question one of them.

" Can you tell me where I'll find Curtis-Harris ?"

" That man sleeps now. Sun go, he wakes."

" Thanks."

He walked on. There was time enough for everything. There was a secret about time—he had it somewhere at the back of his head—something about not chopping it into minutes and seconds. He was all alone by the meandering river now, beyond people ; what did the river know of time ?

Anderson noticed the watch strapped on his wrist. What did it want with him, or he with it ? It was the badge of servitude of a time-serving culture. With sudden revulsion for it, he unbuckled it and tossed it into the river.

The shattered reflection in the water was of piled cloud. It would rain. It grew cold. *Something had altered* .

He looked round, bewildered. A curious double noise filled the air, a low and grating rumble punctuated by high-pitched cracking sounds. Uncertain where this growing uproar came from, Anderson ran forward, then paused again.

Peering back, he could see the women still stooped or squatting over their plots. They looked tiny and crystal-clear, figures glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. From their indifference, they might not have heard the sound. They vanished as Anderson turned round again.

Something was coming down the valley.

Whatever it was, its solid front scooped up the river and ran high up the hills on either side. It came fast, squealing and rumbling.

It glittered like water. Yet it was not water ; its bow was too sharp, too unyielding. It was a glacier.

Anderson fell to the ground.

" I'm mad, mad !" he cried, hiding his eyes, fighting with himself to hold the conviction that this was merely a prehistorian's delusion. He told himself no glacier ever moved at that crazy rate—yet even as he tried to reassure himself, the ground shook under him.

Groaning, he heaved himself up. The wall of ice was bearing down on him fast. It splintered and fell as it came, sending up a shower of ice particles as it was ground down, but always there was more behind it. It stretched right up the valley, grey and uncompromising, scouring out the hills' sides as it came.

Now its noise was tremendous. Cracks played over its towering face like lightning.

Impelled by panic, Anderson turned to run, his furs flapping against his legs.

The glacier moved too fast. He was being overtaken.

There was a cave up the valley slope. He ran like mad for it, driving himself, while the ice seemed to crash and scream at his heels. With a final desperate burst of strength, he flung himself gasping through the low dark opening, and clawed his way hand over fist towards the back of the cave.

He just made it. The express glacier ground on, flinging earth into the opening. Just for a moment the cave was lit with a green-blue light. Then it was sealed up with reverberating blackness.

Chapter Four

Sounds of rain and of his own sobbing. These were the first things he knew. Then he became aware that someone was smoothing his hair and whispering comfort to him. Propping himself on one elbow, Anderson opened his eyes.

The cave entrance was unblocked. He could see grass and a strip of river outside. Rain fell heavily. His head had been resting in Alice's lap ; she it was who stroked his hair. With a flash of repugnance he recalled her distasteful remark about Jocasta, but this was drowned in a welter of doubts concerning himself.

" The glacier . . . was it really there ?" he asked. " Has it gone ? Where is it ?"

" You're all right, Keith. There's no glacier round here. Take it easy."

" It came bursting down the valley towards me. Alice, how did you get here ?"

She put out a hand to pull his head down again, but he evaded it.

" When Stanley turned you out, I couldn't bear to let you go just like that, without any friends, so I followed you. Stanley was furious, but it seemed to me you might be in danger. I've brought your revolver."

" I don't want it."

" Don't say that, Keith. Don't turn into a Neanderthal !"

" What ?" He sat fully upright, glaring at her through the gloom. " What the hell do you mean ?"

" You know. At least I thought you understood."

" I don't understand one damned thing of what's going on here. You'd better start explaining—and first of all I want to know what it looked as if I was doing when I came in here."

" Don't get excited, Keith. It's bad for you." She put her hand over his before continuing. " After you'd thrown your watch into the river, you twisted and ran about a bit and then rushed into here."

" You didn't hear anything odd ? See anything ?"

" No."

" And was I—dressed in skins ?"

" Of course you weren't."

" My mind . . . I'd have sworn there was a glacier . . . But going too fast . . ."

Alice's face was pale as she shook her head.

" Oh, Keith, you are in danger. You must get back to Earth at once. Can't you see this means you have a Neanderthal part of your brain ? Obviously you were experiencing a race memory from that newly opened part. It was so strong it took you over entirely. You *must* get away."

He stood up, stooping his shoulders to keep his skull from scraping the rock overhead. He shook with impatience.

" Alice, Alice, begin at the beginning, will you ? I don't know a thing except that I'm no longer fully in control of my mind."

" Were you ever ? Is the average person on Earth ? Aren't all the sciences of the mind attempts to bring the uncontrollable under control ? Take the simplest level, Keith. If you want to wake early for something important, you can say to yourself " 6.30 " or whatever, and go to sleep ; and something rouses you at the right time. And what about dreams ? You are asleep, your brain's supposed to be asleep. Yet you dream."

" So what ? What has the unconscious to do with this particular set up ?"

" ' The unconscious ' is a pseudo-scientific term to cover a lack of knowledge. You have a moron in your skull who never sleeps. He gives you a nudge at the right time ; it's his crazy thoughts you overhear when you think you're dreaming."

" Look Alice—"

She stood up too. Anxiety twisted her face.

" You wanted an explanation, Keith. Have the grace to listen to it. Let me start from the other end of the tale, and see if you'll like that better.

" Neanderthal was a species of man living in Europe some eighty thousand and more years ago before true man came along. They were gentle creatures, close to nature, needing few artifacts. They were peaceful, unscientific in a special sense you'll understand later.

" Then along came a different species, the Crows—Cro-Magnons you'd call them—Western man's true precursors. Being warlike, they defeated the Neanderthals at every turn. They killed off the men and mated with the Neanderthal women which they kept captive. We, modern man, sprang from the bastard race so formed.

" The mixture never quite mixed. That's why we still have different, often antagonistic, blood groups today—and why there is a silent area in the brain. Crow and Neanderthal brains never quite merged. Crow was dominant, but a mainly powerless lode of Neanderthal lingered on, as apparently vestigial as an appendix."

" My God, I'd like a cigarette," Anderson said. They had both sat down again, ignoring the occasional beads of moisture which dripped down their necks. Alice was close to him, her eyes bright in the shadow.

" Do you begin to see it historically, Keith ? Western man with his clashing double heritage in him has always been restless. Freud's theory of the id comes nearest to labelling the

Neanderthal survivor in us. All civilization can be interpreted as an attempt to vanquish that survivor, and to escape from the irrational it represents, yet at the same time it is a rich source for all artists, dreamers, and creators : because it is the very well of magic.

" The Neanderthal had magic powers. He lived in the dawn, and it's no paradox to say the supernatural and natural are one. The Crows, our ancestors, were scientific, or potentially scientific. They had a belief, fluctuating at first maybe, in cause and effect. As you know, all Western science represents a structure built on our acceptance of unalterable cause and effect.

" This is entirely alien to the Neanderthal. He knows only happening, and from this stems his structure of magic. I use the present tense because the Neanderthal is still strong in man —and on Nehru II, he is not only strong but free, liberated at last from his captor, the Crow."

Anderson stirred uneasily.

" I don't disbelieve any more," he said. " For the first time I find myself understanding why the civilizations of old Europe —the ancient meeting place of Cro-Magnon and Neanderthal —and the civilizations that arose from it in North America are at once the most diverse and most turbulent ever known. This brings us to Curtis-Harris, doesn't it ? And I can see that what has happened in Swettenham is the logical outcome of his theory. The Brittany skull he found back in the eighties was pure Neanderthal yet only a thousand years old. Obviously it belonged to a rare throwback."

" But how rare ? You could pass a properly dressed Neanderthal in the streets of New York and never give him a second glance."

" So Curtis-Harris followed up his theory . . . Yes, I can also see it myself. The proportion of Neanderthal would presumably vary from person to person. I can run over my friends mentally now and know in which of them the proportion is highest."

" Exactly." She smiled at him, reassured and calmer now, even as he was, as she nursed his hand and his revolver. "And because the political situation on Earth is as it is, Curtis-Harris found a way here to develop the theory and turn it into practice ; that is, to release the prisoner in the brain. Earth would allow Swettenham's group little in the way of machinery

or resources in its determination to keep them helpless, and so they were thrust close to nature. That and intellectual recognition brought the Neanderthal to the surface, freed it."

" Everyone turned Neanderthal you mean ?"

" Here on Nehru, which closely resembles pre-historic Earth, the Neanderthal represents better survival value than Crow. Yet not everyone turned, no. Stanley Menderstone did not. Nor Swettenham. Nor several others of the intellectuals. Their N-factor, as Stanley calls it, was either too low or non-existent."

" I see . . . What happened to Swettenham ?"

" He was killed. So were the other pure Crows, all but Stanley, who's tough—you saw. Apparently there was trouble at first until they sorted themselves out."

" And these two patrol ships Earth sent ?"

" I saw what happened to the one that brought me. Ninety per cent of the crew had a high enough N-factor to make the change ; a willingness to desert helped them. The other ten per cent . . . died out. All but me. Stanley took care of me."

She laughed harshly. " I've had my belly full of Stanley and Nehru II, Keith. I want you to take me back with you to Earth."

Anderson looked at her, full of doubt.

" What about my N-factor ? Obviously I've got it in me. Hence the glacier, which was a much stronger danger signal from my brain than the illusion about having a sister. Hence I suppose my new fears of technical Crow object like watches, revolvers and . . . model railroads. Am I Crow or not, for heaven's sake ?"

" I'd say by the struggle you've been through with yourself that you're equally balanced. Perhaps you can even decide. Which do you want to be ?"

He looked at her in amazement.

" Crow, of course : my normal self—who'd be a shambling, loose-limbed, low-browed, shaggy tramp by choice ?"

" All the adjectives you use are subjective and not really terms of abuse—in fact, they're Crow propaganda. Or so a Neanderthal would say. The two points of view are irreconcilable."

" Are you seriously suggesting . . . Alice, they're sub-men, hopeless ?"

" Yes, to us. Yet they have contentment, and communion with the forces of Earth, and their magic. Nor are their brains inferior to Crow brains."

" Much good it did them. The Cro-Magnons still beat them."

" In a sense they have not yet been beaten. But their magic needs preparation, incantation—it's something they can't do while fending off a fusilade of arrows. But left to themselves they can become spirits, animals—"

" Woolly rhinoceroses for instance ?"

" Yes."

" To lure me from my wheeled machine which they would fear ! My God, Alice, it all fits . . ." He clutched his head and groaned, then looked up to enquire, " Why are you forcing their point of view on me when you're a Crow ?"

" Don't you see, my dear ?" Her eyes were large as they searched his. " To find how strong your N-factor is. To find if you're friend or enemy. When the rain stops, I must move. Stanley will be looking for me, and it wouldn't surprise me if Curtis-Harris were not looking for you ; he must guess you've had time to sort things out in your mind. I want to know if I can come with you . . ."

He shook himself, dashed a water drip off his forehead. Disliking her, and not only because she was an opportunist, he tried to delay giving an answer. He had seen through Alice, and wondered with a twinge of self-scorn if he would have done so as easily had she been prettier.

" Earth's not so bad," he said. " Menderstone's right, it is regimented—it would never suit an individualist like him. And it's not so pretty as Nehru . . . Yes, Alice, I'll take you. I can't leave you here."

She flung herself onto him, clasping him in her arms, kissing his ear and cheek when he twisted his lips away from hers. Anderson thought angrily that the trip home would resemble one long game of tag, but clearly he had a duty to get this unfortunate woman out of her predicament.

" Respond, can't you ?" Alice whispered fiercely. " Even Stanley—"

She stiffened at a noise outside the cave, a faint noise audible above the rain. Anderson turned his head to look where she was looking. The rain was much gentler now. Before its fading curtain a face appeared.

The chief features of this face were its low brow, two large and lustrous eyes, a prominent nose and a straggling length of wet, sandy beard. It was Curtis-Harris.

He raised both hands.

" Come to see me, child of earth, as I come to see you, peaceful, patient—"

As more of him rose into view in the cave mouth, Alice fired the revolver. The bellow of its report in the confined space was deafening. At ten yards' range, she did not miss. Curtis-Harris clutched at his chest and tumbled forward into the wet ground, crying inarticulately.

Furiously, Anderson turned on Alice.

" That's murder, sheer murder ! You shouldn't have done it ! You shouldn't have done—"

She smacked him hard across the cheek bone with her free hand. She looked like a vulture.

" If you're Crow, he's your enemy as well as mine. Only death can lie between us. I don't see myself as a living memorial to old times the way Stanley does. I've not got his nerve. I'd kill 'em all. I'm glad to kill that ape Curtis-Harris . . ." She drew a long shuddering breath. " And now we've got to move fast for your rocket before the pack hunts us down."

" You planned this well, didn't you ?"

" Keith, I'll make it up to you on the journey home, I promise."

" Oh no, you won't, you ugly squaw ! You'll be locked in your cabin. Come on, let's git."

They slid past the body out into the mizzling rain. As they started down the slope, a weird baying cry came from their left flank. A group of Neanderthals, men and women, stood on a promontory only two hundred yards away. Clearly they had witnessed Curtis-Harris's collapse and were marshalling their forces. As Alice and Anderson appeared, the group charged forward.

" Run !" Alice shouted needlessly. " Down to the river. Swim it and we're safe."

Close together they sped down the slippery incline. Without a pause or word, they plunged through reeds and mud and dived fully dressed into the slow waters. Making good time, the Neanderthals rushed down the slope after them, but halted when they reached the river.

On nearing the other bank, Anderson turned and helped Alice out of the water. She collapsed puffing on the bank.

" Not so young as I was . . . We're safe now, Keith. Nothing short of a forest fire induces those apes to swim. But

we still might meet trouble this side. So we'll avoid the settlement. Even if the apes there aren't after us, we don't want to face Stanley with his rifle. Poor old Stanley ! He'll be cut up . . ."

Anderson moved off in surly silence. His mind was troubled by Curtis-Harris's death ; and he felt he was being used.

The rain ceased and the sun reappeared as they pressed forward. Travelling in a wide arc, they circuited the village and picked up the track which led back to Anderson's ship.

Alice grumbled intermittently as she went. At last Anderson turned on her.

" You don't have to come with me. This was your idea. If you want to, go back to Stanley Menderstone !"

" At least he cared about a woman's feelings."

" Oh, did he ? They are not so fussy on Earth, where you won't have the same scarcity value. Go on back to him."

She plodded along beside him without speaking. The gleaming black hull of the ship was visible now between trees.

" You'll have to work on Earth !" he taunted her.

" I shan't. I shall get married. I've still got some looks."

" You've forgotten something. Women have to have work certificates before they can marry these days. A bit of regimentation will do you good."

A wave of hatred overcame him. When Alice started to snap back at him, Anderson struck her on the shoulder. A look of panic and understanding passed over her face.

" Oh, Keith . . ." she said. And then she turned and was running away, back to the settlement, calling the name of Menderstone as she ran.

Anderson watched her go without emotion. Then he turned and sidled through the trees.

His ship no longer looked welcoming. He splashed through a puddle and touched it, withdrawing his hand quickly. Distorted by the curve of the hull, his reflection peered at him from the polished metal. He did not recognise himself.

" Someone there imprisoned in Crow ship," he said, turning away.

With hardly any hesitation, he stripped off his damp clothes and faded among the uncountable leaves and the bright grasses and the thrilling scents of earth and verdure. Shadow and light slithered over his skin in an almost tangible pattern before the glittering greenery enfolded him and he was lost into his new Eden.

—Brian W. Aldiss

Although he has not been writing so many stories of late, E. C. Tubb is still one of the most prolific of British science fiction writers with a long string of successes behind him in the ten years he has been producing. The following story is a fine tongue-in-cheek example of his satirical approach to a theme which has been too prevalent of late in many contemporary magazines.

IRON HEAD

by E. C. TUBB

Chapter One

Jake was in the lower forty checking fences when the overseer arrived. He caught a glimpse of the red scooter gliding over the hill and hastily turned his own mount from the grazing herd below. He was fast but not quite fast enough, Kennedy's head framed itself in the window and his thumb jerked downward. Jake sighed, pressed a button on his own mount, the whine of the rotor dying as it settled towards the prairie.

He dismounted, hiked back his stetson and reached for his makings. The smoke was almost complete by the time Kennedy dropped beside him.

"I've been calling you," said the overseer.

"I didn't hear you." Jake finished rolling his cigarette, trying to ignore the knot of foreboding in his stomach.

" I called loud enough," grumbled Kennedy. " I've been calling since I left the ranch house. You sure you didn't hear me ?'

" I had other things to do." He glanced towards the herd, they were still too near. " You want something ?"

Kennedy nodded, his eyes on the animals. " A fine bunch of beef," he said, then frowned. " One of them's got a sore foot."

" I'd noticed. Nothing serious."

" Another's got a touch of stomach ache." The overseer's eyes grew distant. " Two of them. You notice that too ?"

Jake grunted, lit his cigarette and let smoke plume through his nostrils. Casually he leaned against his mount, deliberately trying to appear relaxed and casual, the idealistic picture of the tall, rangy cowboy of legend. He had been ten years building that picture with a surprising degree of success. Kennedy wasn't impressed. To him Jake was just another worker for the Apex Delicacy Co.

" I've had a memo from Head Office about you," he said. " Seems that Personnel riffled through their cards the other day and discovered something."

" So ?"

" So you're to take a trip east. I've brought a replacement for you, he's at the ranch house now. Nice young fellow, bright as a pin, keen too." He saw Jake's expression. "Take it easy now, I had nothing to do with it."

Jake dropped his cigarette, trod on it, stared at the overseer.

" Have you any complaints about the way I tend the herd ?"

" No."

" Any complaints of any kind ?"

" None at all."

" Then why am I being replaced ?"

Kennedy didn't say anything but his eyes took on a sharp, direct focus. He stared at Jake for a long time. Over towards the hill the grazing animals moved, suddenly restless and some small animal bolted wildly from cover and raced towards the horizon. Jake didn't move. Kennedy sighed and shook his head.

" Look, son," he said gently, " I've nothing against you, personally, and you get on well with the others. How about if I delayed things a day ? There's a clinic over in Bent

Forks, you could slip over there and—" He broke off as Jake shook his head. " Not interested ?"

" Not possible." Jake sounded as miserable as he felt. " I've tried three times already."

" I see." Kennedy was a philosopher, he shrugged. " Well, I guess that's all there is to it. They expect you at Head Office noon tomorrow."

Noon found Jake five hundred miles from where he had spent the past ten years of his life. He entered the soaring building of the Apex Delicacy Co., ignoring the flashing murals which told him that he was in the precincts of the world's second largest purveyor of rare and exotic foods. A receptionist took his name, handed him over to a guide who, in turn passed him through a small door into a small office. A fussy little man took over and, for the next hour, hummed and clucked over Jake as he put him through his paces. He then vanished into another room leaving Jake alone.

An hour passed and he grew bored. A second hour passed before someone finally remembered him and sent up a sealed container of coffee and a packet of sandwiches. The coffee tasted like mud and the sandwiches were food and that was about all. The Apex Delicacy Co., obviously, didn't believe in wasting their rare and exotic viands on the staff. Yet another hour and the little examiner returned.

He sat down, looked at Jake, and regretfully shook his head.

" Mr. Merton," he said. " I'm afraid that I have some very bad news. I wish I didn't have to say this but—"

" I'm fired." Jake had sensed it coming all along.

" Well, I wouldn't have put it exactly like that," demurred the examiner. " Let us just say that, owing to circumstances beyond our control, the company is reluctantly forced to terminate your employment."

" But it means the same thing ?"

The examiner coughed.

" Then I'm fired," said Jake bitterly. " No matter how you dress it up in fancy words it comes to the same thing."

He should have been angry. Anger would have been a relief, but all he could feel was a hollow sense of desolation as if he had just lost his entire world. Which, in a sense, he had. He'd liked it out on the range, tending the herd, the smug ranch house with the television and taped music, the open skies and

the changing seasons. It didn't seem right that after ten years of honest work it should all end like this. Fired, and through no fault of his own.

Patiently the examiner explained it to him.

" We want the best man for the job, Mr. Merton, that's logical, isn't it ?"

" Nothing wrong with the way I did the job." Jake was stubborn.

" Perhaps not, but times change and we have to change with them. You were in charge of a lot of rare and delicate animals, Mr. Merton. A cow represents a sizeable investment. She could be sick or frightened or threatened in some way and you would never know. It's a responsible position and, frankly, you aren't the best man to hold it."

" No complaints so far," said Jake doggedly. The examiner sighed.

" True, but try and look at it this way. At one time an illiterate could have done your job but, when literacy became general, such a man was no longer good enough." He hesitated. " You, Mr. Merton, and I mean no offence, are in the position of an illiterate."

" Because I can't read minds ?"

" Exactly. Ten years ago it wasn't so important. The Hammadran Technique was fairly new on Earth then and the company wanted to be fair. It was decided that, within ten years, every adult would have had the chance to become a telepath. The forecast was correct. You, Mr. Merton, are rather unique."

" It's not my fault," protested Jake. The examiner didn't appear to have heard.

" I've tried to be fair," he continued. " I've given you every test in the book and a few extras to make certain. You can neither receive or transmit. Your head, telepathically speaking, is like a steel ball. I'm sorry for you, Mr. Merton."

" You're sorry !"

" Truly I am. It must be a dreadful thing to be so handicapped. Dreadful !"

He was talking, thought Jake, as if he had a loathsome affliction, much as people of old might have talked about a leper. He stirred restlessly in his chair.

" Well, I don't know," he said defensively. " I get along."

" I'm sure you do," beamed the examiner. " You are an intelligent man despite your—ah—affliction. You appreciate

the rarity and value of your late charges and realise that nothing but the best can be good enough for them." He rose, held out his hand. "Goodbye, Mr. Merton. Your termination pay is waiting for you at the main desk."

The pay, after deductions, wasn't as much as it could have been but Jake wasn't worried. He was fit, willing and unhampered, it could only be a question of time before he found other employment. In the meantime he had ten years of semi-isolation to catch up on. He decided to take it easy for a few days and look over the city.

Ten years had changed it but not all that much. Some new buildings, wider streets and unfamiliar arcades, the expected structural alterations. The space port was something else. It wasn't just its size though that was terrific, it was the volume of traffic which surprised him. Ten years ago the port had been a small appendage to the city, hardly larger than the regular airfield, now it was a sprawling expanse of sheds, warehouses, administration buildings and the rest of it. Even as he watched a liner fell from the sky, steadying itself with a shimmer of blue, then settling to the ground. Transport vehicles, looking like ants beside the colossus, streamed towards the opening hatches.

Jake was thoughtful as the bus droned back to the city.

Ten years was a long time, a third of his life, but even so progress had been out of all proportion. Space travel wasn't new and the Banner drive had been discovered before he was born but from the appearance of the space port, commerce with the stars had literally exploded into being. The Hammadran Technique? It was more than a possibility. Telepathy had removed the natural barriers between races, the difficulty of communication, the mutual distrusts. Trade, providing there was both trust and communication, was inevitable between races who traversed the stars.

Jake felt more out of things than before. It was a feeling which grew.

Little things did it. The uneasy silence whenever he tried to buy anything or order anything. It wasn't a real silence, he knew that, it was just the normal procedure but, to him with his total inability to receive the transmitted thoughts, it was a silence. Then would come the clearing of the throat, the verbal questions, the thinly disguised impatience. And there were other things.

Like the time he'd gone to a concert. Jake liked music and had bought a ticket. He'd taken his seat in the auditorium and settled down for a pleasant evening. The first shock came when the curtains parted and he'd seen the orchestra. None of the musicians had instruments. Not only that, none of the singers had sang. He had sat in miserable silence, surrounded by rapt faces as the rest of the audience had listened to, and enjoyed, the telepathised music and vocals from the stage.

The real trouble came when he tried to get a job. With labour organised the way it was and employers on the Free Market taking their pick of a dozen applicants for every vacancy a non-telepath didn't stand a chance.

" Who wants a dummy ?" The agent at the Market was a big, fat, shining man who didn't believe in calling a spade anything but that.

" I came here for a job," said Jake. " I'm big and strong and can work."

" But you're still a dummy." The agent waved a chubby paw. " Now don't get all hot under the collar. Maybe it's your fault, maybe not, but you don't radiate worth a damn. Who the hell is going to employ you ?"

" If I knew I wouldn't be here." Jake was getting annoyed. " Or maybe you think I like giving you a registration fee ?"

" Take it easy," said the agent. He looked over the Market, at the men lounging on benches, the women busy sewing, a few couples sitting close together. There were perhaps fifty people waiting for prospective employers or notified vacancies. Ten years ago the place would have been filled with the low murmur of conversation. Now there was only silence.

" Look at it from the employer's viewpoint," urged the fat man. " He wants someone to work for him, right ?"

Jake nodded.

" So he gets someone. But he wants to know he can trust the guy. Now, tell me, how is he going to know he can trust you ?"

" I'm honest," said Jake. The agent waved his paw again.

" Am I arguing ? Sure you're honest—but how can you pursuade an employer that ? He wants to be able to read you. He wants to be sure." The agent slapped his paw down on a book. " See this ? Fifty vacancies a week if we're lucky. Over

a thousand names booked, fees paid, people waiting. And not a dummy among them. Putting you down would be a waste of time."

"I see." Jake stood, not knowing quite what to do. His money was almost out, two more days would see him kicked out of his hotel. Maybe he'd made a mistake in staying in the city but it was too late to think of that now. If anyone could help him the agent could. The fat man pursed his lips then shook his head.

"You've got a problem, son," he said not unkindly. "You should have stayed in the sticks, farmers, some of them at least, ain't so particular."

"How about another planet?" Jake was grasping at straws. "I can handle cattle and would be useful on a frontier world."

"Sure you would," agreed the agent. "If you could get there. Know what the fare is to, say, Beta Sirius?"

Jake didn't. The agent told him and killed even that faint hope.

"Tell you what," said the agent. "Now don't blow your top at me, it's only a suggestion." He hesitated, looking at Jake's size and obvious muscular power, then decided to take a chance. "If I was in your shoes I'd join the Guards."

"The Guards!" Jake had heard the suggestion before. It was equivalent to telling a man to go to hell.

Earth wasn't at war but had neatly solved the problem of surplus production and manpower by equipping mercenaries. These mercenaries were sold to any ambitious ruler who could foot the bill. Theoretically they had a charter to safeguard their welfare but in practice they were used for the dirtiest jobs, the most suicidal missions and, generally, treated like the expendable units they were.

Naturally, no one wanted to join the Guards. No one in their right mind, that is. Some had no choice, certain crimes carried forced enlistment as an automatic penalty, other law-breakers were offered an alternative, contract-breakers knew what to expect. And, of course, there were always the homeless, the desperate and the starving.

* * *

Chapter Two

Commander Zeten, officer of the Imperial forces of Gliken the Olgarch of Kund, smiled as he stared into the vision screen of his cruiser. He was a tall man, impeccably clad in yellow and vermilion, his sharp, hatchet-like face matched by the keenness of his eyes beneath sweeping brows. He stood, hands locked behind his back, rocking a little on the balls of his feet as he smiled at the screen. He had reason for satisfaction. His ship had just struck a decisive blow in the War of Liberation.

Framed in the screen the wrecked hull of a vessel of the enemy forces rested in the firm grip of magnalines.

True, it was a small vessel, a twenty-man scout from the look of it, but no vessel was so small as to be harmless and no victory too insignificant for congratulation. It was from such small victories the War of Liberation would be won.

He turned as an aide entered the compartment. The aide saluted, radiated the appropriate deference, made his report.

" The vessel is of Terran manufacture, sir. A twenty-man scout probably on a raiding expedition."

" Armament ?"

" Excessive for its class."

" The crew ?"

" Terrans."

Zeten nodded, he was not surprised. These Terran mercenaries were usually to be found on small ships and usually on suicide missions. It spoke highly of them that they had managed to penetrate the Gliken zone of influence so deeply.

" Have the salvage crew complete the task of dismantling," ordered Zeten. " All fissionable material to be salvaged, all items of saleable value to be stored, the usual thing." He glanced to where the wreck tugged futilely against the magnetic cables. " Better burn the dead with the hull. No need to trouble ourselves about mercenaries."

" Yes, sir." The aide hesitated. " Sir. Not all of the crew are dead. There was a survivor."

" So ?" This time Zeten was surprised. Survivors were rare indeed in the loser of a space action.

" A man, sir. The salvage crew found him sealed within a small compartment. He is injured, unconscious, a Terran like the others."

" Rank ?"

" Unknown, sir. He wore no insignia." The aide paused. " He has been left on the ship, sir. Shall he be burned with the rest ?"

" Yes. No—wait !" Zeten liked to think himself a civilised man and something of a philosopher. Terrans were rabble, of course, mere hired mercenaries, by all the usages of war the man could expect no mercy. And yet—? By all the rules he should be dead. Had fate dictated his survival ? It was a pleasing concept and it would do no harm to indulge in a whim. Also it would relieve the monotony of the journey. The man, of course, could always be executed later.

" Have him brought aboard," ordered the commander. " Tend his wounds and, when he has healed, interrogate him." He radiated amused tolerance. " It should, at least, be entertaining."

The interrogation, if not entertaining, lacked nothing in interest.

" Name, age, rank and number ?" The interrogator radiated the questions with crisp efficiency. If anything he was bored.

Jake wasn't bored. His last conscious thought had been the crushing impact of an explosion which had flung him against the walls of his cell. The next thing he knew he was in bed, with a tall, razor-faced man bending over him. Then had come a time of waiting while various aches in his body disappeared. Now here he was, facing another of the razor-faced crew. It took little imagination and less intelligence to guess that he was a prisoner of the enemy.

" Name, age, rank and number ?" The interrogator was impatient. He was also honest, loyal, direct and incorruptible. A telepath couldn't be anything else. He frowned as Jake remained silent, flung out a mental probe and met nothing but blankness. Startled he tried again with the same result. Jake knew what was happening, he'd been through it uncounted times before.

" Something bothering you ?" he said politely. He spoke in Lingua, the composite of a dozen languages which the Guards and traders had used before the Hammadran Technique had made Terrans equal with the rest of the galaxy. The interrogator was shocked into repeating his questions in a verbal form.

" Jake Merton," he heard. " Thirty-two. Admiral. No number." Jake was being facetious. His knowledge of the enemy was slight but he saw no harm in trying to get officer-treatment if he was permitted to live. If he was due for execution the lie wouldn't matter anyway.

" An Admiral !"

" Certainly." Jake framed the next question with delicate care. " I take it that I am the only survivor ?"

" Yes." The interrogator was flustered, he answered without thinking. " But an Admiral ! On such a small craft?"

Jake simply smiled.

The interrogator was at a loss. Normal procedure was simply to read the desired information directly from a subject's mind, first arousing the response by appropriate questioning. Verbal techniques were never used. Conversation was useful only as an archaic social grace and for long-distance communication by sub-etheric radio.

On the other hand Jake was relieved. As the only survivor there was no one to betray him. As far as these people were concerned he was exactly who he stated himself to be. They might doubt him but they could never prove him to be a liar. For the first time Jake had reason to thank the violent temper of the sergeant who had caused the fight which had ended with him being flung into the brig. Being a prisoner had saved his life.

The interrogator was trying again. Unable to use his normal techniques he was making hard work of it.

" You wore no insignia," he said. " Why ?"

" I am an Admiral," said Jake. " You will please remember that."

The interrogator gulped, repeated his question, hesitated then reluctantly added the title.

Jake remained silent, smiling with a calm assurance.

" You were discovered without armour in a small compartment—sir. May I ask how that came to be ?"

" I am alive," said Jake. " My companions are dead. Does that answer you ?"

It didn't, but the interrogator, like all telepaths knew nothing of subterfuge. He read his own meaning into Jake's reply. He read his own meaning into all Jake's replies, at

least to the questions he condescended to answer. Finally, after a last, desperate effort to read the prisoner's mind, the interrogator decided to call it a day.

" An admiral ?" Commander Zeten was bewildered. " On so small a craft ?"

" Yes, sir." The interrogator mentally squirmed. " I questioned him about that and he just smiled. I asked him other questions and he just kept on smiling."

" And no leakage ?"

" None at all, sir. Not a thought escaped his head."

" I see." Zeten didn't doubt his subordinate's statement ; a telepath cannot lie. " It seems that I must interview this man myself."

He had the grace, afterwards, to admit that his suspicions had been groundless. The interrogator was still good at his job, still sharp of mind and intellect and, of course, still incapable of lying. He had told the simple truth, fantastic though it had seemed. Non-telepaths, in this sector of the galaxy, weren't rare—they were unheard of. The commander made the only logical deduction he could.

" The man is an Admiral," he decided. " He is obviously a person of importance because his companions sealed him in a small chamber before engaging in battle. That it was the safest place on the vessel is proven by the fact that he is alive while his companions are all dead."

" But would an officer in charge of his vessel allow himself to be so treated ?" The aide was dubious. Zeten impatient.

" He was obviously not in command of the vessel. Would an Admiral command so small a craft ? Of course not."

" Then—?" The aide was baffled. Zeten sighed, conscious of his own superior grasp of deductive reasoning.

" He is a person of some importance," he resumed. " That we have proved by logical processes. Let us continue ; he is important ; his life had to be saved if at all possible. He wore no insignia. The latter fact I find of great significance. Why should a man in his position bear no insignia ? I shall tell you. Because it was to avoid recognition."

In fact, as Jake could have told him, it was simply that fatigues carried no insignia—not those belonging to the cook at least.

" And why did he wish to avoid recognition ?" Zeten paused for greater dramatic effect. " Because, no doubt, he was on a special mission."

" If we could only read his mind," brooded the aide. Zeten slammed his hand down on the table.

" There we have it ! Our inability to read his mind must be due to a personal mind-shield of some kind."

" Sir !" The aide was aghast. Mind-shields belonged strictly to the realm of perpetual motion machines and immortality. Utterly desirable but impossible of achievement. Zeten bared his teeth.

" Can you think of any other reason ?"

" No, sir, but all tests have failed to reveal the presence of any foreign object in the prisoner's skull or body."

" That means nothing. The shield could be due to a system of mind training or, perhaps, he is a sport, a mutant gifted with this single great talent." Zeten looked solemn. " You realise, of course, just what this means ?"

The aide realised.

A man who cannot be read ! It had not occurred to anyone that it worked both ways. It was as impossible for them to conceive of a man who couldn't read minds as it was for Jake to imagine what it would be like to look out of the back of his head. Zeten was dazed by what he had found.

" Such a man could be of supreme importance. He could be the repository of the entire enemy battle-plan, more, the instigator of it, the Master Planner. With him any secret would be safe from prying minds." His dazed expression deepened. " You know, I have the feeling that we have captured the key man of the enemy offensive." He sighed. " He must be executed, naturally."

" Must he ?" The aide was bold. He made the suggestion which was to earn him rapid promotion. " He is a Terran, a mercenary. If he is of value to the enemy then imagine the value he would be to us."

It was a concept approaching genius. Zeten gave it due consideration.

" He is a mercenary."

" True."

" He can have no real loyalty towards the enemy."

" True. Very true." Zeten looked thoughtful. " Perhaps, if the offer were high enough—"

Chapter Three

The celebrations seemed endless. Lord Merton, squirming in his uncomfortably new uniform, wished that they'd sign the peace terms and get the thing over with. The fact that he'd been instrumental in bringing the War of Liberation to a triumphant conclusion afforded him no immediate satisfaction. He was too hot.

" A great day for Kund," whispered a voice at his side. Jake turned, recognised one of his admirals, forced himself to smile in polite acknowledgement.

" Indeed a great occasion," he murmured politely. " But solely due to the magnificent courage of the forces of Kund."

It was the right answer, the Admiral's smirk attested to that. He bowed, made a few trite remarks, moved on to join the cluster around the Gliken. Jake, easing his jewel-encrusted collar, resumed his brooding on the future.

Things had happened fast since he had been salvaged from the wreck. Once Zeten had decided on a course of action Jake had simply allowed himself to be swept along with the tide. From being an Admiral in pretence Jake became an Admiral in reality and, once having started the pretence, he hadn't dared back down.

His wits, under the pressure of necessity, gained a rapid keenness. Telepaths, he discovered, didn't try to conceal emotions. In this sector of the galaxy telepathy was normal and so, even without being able to read minds, he could make a few shrewd guesses. Shrewd enough for him to qualify the assumption that he could read minds. From then on he had ridden a roller-coaster to fame.

Unhampered by patriotism and not really caring which side won as long as he survived he had sold out to the Gliken. Thinking as they did that he knew the enemy battle-plans, the forces of Kund obeyed his orders to the letter and, perhaps because of their sheer randomness, they led to spectacular victories. A old spacehand himself, Jake had enough sympathy with the rank and file not to concentrate on their destruction. Instead he drove right into the heart of the enemy, hit them hard where it hurt, their pockets, and ducked out again.

It was only a matter of time before they sued for peace.

" Ah, my Lord Merton !" Zeten, resplendent in a uniform seemingly fashioned of solid diamonds, thrust himself towards

Jake. Zeten was pleased with himself and he had cause to be. He had been the one who had discovered Jake. He, in a way, could claim to having been instrumental in winning the war. Promotion and plunder together with a place at Court beside the Gliken had followed automatically. He could afford to be generous.

" The Gliken has been asking after you, Lord Merton," said Zeten. "He was most interested in hearing how I found you." He chuckled. " You were fortunate, my Lord, another commander would have failed to recognise your importance."

" I owe much to your Grace," said Jake smoothly. Zeten was now a Duke. " But then, I never underestimated your astuteness."

" It has won us the war." Zeten waved a casual hand. " But enough of that. I bear tidings of good news. The Gliken has expressed a wish to see you after the ceremonies." He smiled benignly at Jake. " A private audience."

" I am honoured, said Jake. He recognised the feeling in his stomach and wondered just what form the next batch of trouble would take.

The Gliken of Kund, Ruler of two star systems and Protector of three more didn't look the part. He was small, fat, bald and singularly unattractive. He also looked stupid and quite a few people had made the mistake of thinking that he was. Ugly or not no one could remain the Gliken without having both brains and the ability to use them. One of the elementary precautions any ruler must take if he is to continue to rule is to recognise personal threats even when they are only a vague probability. Jake, to the Gliken, was such a threat.

He squatted in his chair as Jake walked forward, his footsteps ringing on the marble of the audience chamber. Armed guards stood against the walls, discreetly shielded by heavy curtains. Attendants moved softly about the Gliken bearing wine, succulent fruits, assorted dainties for the august palate. They were, Jake knew, window-dressing, ceremonial relics to impress visiting delegates. Their real function, he guessed, was that of personal bodyguards.

" Lord Merton !" The Gliken rose and extended his hand. It was unheard of honour. " Allow me to extend my personal gratification at the decisive victory wrought by your forces."

" Your forces," corrected Jake diplomatically. " Alone I could have done nothing."

" True, I am pleased you recognise that." The Gliken, despite his love of ceremonial, knew how to get to the root of a matter. " Have you any plans as to your future ?"

" I contemplate a life of tranquility," said Jake. " You have been so gracious as to bestow on me vast estates and they will support my retirement."

" Indeed ?" The Gliken looked thoughtful. " Are we not to see you at Court ?'

" It will be an honour to attend the Gliken." Jake began to sweat. Now, more than ever, he wished he knew just what was going on in that bald, round head. Either way he was suspect. If he retired the Gliken would think him guilty of intrigue ; if he stayed at Court the same.

" Your presence would be a comfort to me," said the Gliken smoothly. " And yet you are too valuable a man to waste in idleness."

This, guessed Jake, was it. He looked hard at the ruler. The Gliken looked uncomfortable. That was nothing new. Everyone seemed to feel uncomfortable when Jake was around. He could even sympathise with them. How else could they feel when they believed he could read their every thought but they couldn't read his ?

" I was thinking of sending a punitive expedition to teach the Matriach of Amrha a lesson," continued the Gliken hurriedly. " With yourself, naturally, in full command. I imagine the enterprise would appeal to you."

Jake wasn't fooled. He knew how the Gliken felt. Jake was popular and had tremendous prestige ; that alone would have made him an embarrassment to the ruler of Kund. Add to that the fact that the Gliken couldn't trust him because he didn't know what was in Jake's mind and the situation was delicate. Too delicate for assassination. A punitive expedition, on the other hand, was a reasonable and effective means of getting him out of the way. It would also kill two birds with one stone.

" You want me out of the way," said Jake. It did no harm to enhance his reputation.

The Gliken admitted it.

" All right." Jake pretended to consider the proposal. " When do I start ?"

The relief of the Gliken was obvious.

The expedition consisted of almost a third of the effective fleet. Jake wondered a little at its size ; he'd assumed that he would be given a few vessels only. The Gliken could, of course, be getting rid of a double embarrassment by sending such a large force ; unemployed fighting men have always been a nuisance. Or there could be another reason. Jake gained an inkling of it during the farewell ceremonies.

The usual guff had been radiated and, out of respect to Jake's well-known idiosyncracy, the same thoughts uttered in Lingua when the Gliken came up to say a personal farewell. He gripped Jake's hand.

" I'm giving you a free hand," said the Gliken. " Take as long as you like but don't come back until you've taught that bitch a lesson she'll never forget !"

Jake learned more during the voyage.

" She turned him down," said his second-in-command. " Refused his gifts and sent back his ambassador. I don't think he's ever forgiven her."

" I see." Jake was thoughtful. He was in the middle of a grudge fight. The Matriarch would be certain to fight back with everything she had and losses were inevitable. There was a good possibility that Jake himself would be eliminated. The Gliken was quite a schemer.

" What's she like ?" asked Jake.

" The Matriarch ?" Tomore, the second-in-command, shrugged. " Nothing special, tall, skinny, flat-faced and with washed-out hair and eyes. Personally I could never understand what the Gliken saw in her."

" Is she rich ?"

" The Matriach of Amrha owns three suns and a dozen habitable worlds not counting an assortment of planetoids." Tomore nodded. " Yes, it's fair to say that she is wealthy."

" You said owns," Jake was curious. " Don't you mean rules ?"

"Same thing. The Matriach owns everything ; subjects only hold property by her dispensation. All trade and commerce is operated by her agents. Of course, in actual practice it makes little difference. She takes her percentage and lets the experts run things but, if she wanted to, she could sell everything."

" Quite a girl," said Jake. He was beginning to discover her attraction for the Gliken. " Young ?"

" For a Matriach, yes. She'd be about the same age as yourself, maybe a little younger. She came into the title early, her mother was killed in a rotor-crash." Tomore looked slyly at Jake. " Would the Lord Merton be interested ?"

" Only in a military sense. Do you think we can take her ?"

" Impossible !" The Second was emphatic. " With all respect, my lord, the Matriach isn't the same as our late enemy. Her subjects are intensely loyal and they have a defensive network nothing could penetrate. The most we can hope for is to blast a few outposts, destroy some of her commerce and raid a few isolated planets."

" You think that she is invincible then ?"

Tomore shrugged. He knew of Jake and the marvels Jake had done in the War of Liberation but, as he tried to point out, this wasn't the same.

" The enemy were disunited," he said. " Three times, to my knowledge, the Gliken has tried to take Amrha and failed. Again, with respect, my Lord, I do not think that even you can achieve the impossible."

Jake had other ideas. He'd learned a lot about the way telepaths fought and knew their weakness. He remembered the crew in the twenty-man scout, the way they had sat for hours at a stretch, silent, their minds straining to catch an enemy thought and so gain warning. Sometimes a man would break and throw everyone into confused panic. Telepaths were not and could not be isolated, the emotions of one affected them all.

The forces of the Matriach, like all telepaths, would rely wholly on learning what the enemy intended and then concentrate their forces to defeat the predicted attack. With each crew-member acting like a wild broadcasting radio set security was impossible. The lowest deckhand knew exactly what the commander intended ; secrecy and surprise were unknown. The side with the keenest telepaths and the ability to concentrate the heaviest forces the soonest invariably won.

Unless, of course, they had a freak like Jake to contend with.

* * *

Chapter Four

Ayha, the Matriach of Amrha sat with her council and tapped one slender foot impatiently on the marble floor as councillor after councillor rose, gave his opinion on the state of affairs, then sat only to have those same opinions repeated after him by another.

" So, gentlemen, I take it that you are in perfect accord ?"

Their thoughts answered her, a smooth, calm, reassuring wave of semi-amused confidence. Elgar, Head of the Council, rose to sum up their deliberations.

" The invading fleet, your Majesty, is but another gesture by the Gliken. He knows, and his commander must know, that they can have no possible success. A little raiding, some minor destruction, that is all they can accomplish."

" I see." The tapping of the slender foot grew faster. " Is that all ?"

" All, your Majesty ?"

" Do I not make myself clear ? Or is it that you consider that I am not fitted to be informed of military matters ?" Her thoughts probed mind after mind. Elgar had the grace to look uncomfortable. Ahya smiled at him, her eyes betraying her amusement. She knew perfectly well that he had never been able to accustom himself to the youth of the new Matriarch.

" There is little of which to inform your Majesty." Elgar recovered his calm. " Our scouts have orbited the invading fleet and have gained information from the crews. The object of their attack is Aamon, a planet well to the edge of your Majesty's empire. They hope to be able to win the planet and use it as a base for punitive raiding." His amusement was obvious. " As a battle plan it lacks both sense and logic."

" You are certain of that ?"

" There can be no question of doubt. Three individual scouts each crewed with our keenest minds have gained the information."

" I see," Ayha was young but she was no fool. A frown creased her high forehead. " This information was gained from the crews, you say ?"

" Yes, your Majesty."

" Not the commanding officer ?"

" No specification was made." Elgar looked blank. " But does it make any difference ? What the commander knows the crews know also. The information must be the same."

It was, of course, true and she knew it but a streak of stubbornness insisted that she continue if only to shake some of their calm placidity. Also, despite her hatred of the Gliken, she didn't underestimate him. It was not his way to send a fleet to utter destruction. The more she considered it the more she became convinced that there was something she didn't know. Elgar tried to reassure her.

" Military matters are a thing of logic and sense," he said. " I admit that, on the face of it, there seems to be no logic to their battle plan but on the other hand, what else can they do?"

Being a woman she chose to argue.

" I am not concerned with logic, Elgar, only survival. The Gliken of Kund won his War of Liberation despite all logic which stated that he could not possibly gain a victory. If he can win such a war we cannot afford to be placid. Who is commanding the enemy fleet ?"

" A man named Merton, your Majesty. A Terran."

" Their greatest commander." Ayha rose to her feet, the council was over. " Find out more about this Merton."

Merton was a monster. Merton was a strange, frightening enigma. Merton had never known defeat and, almost single handed, had broken the deadlock of the last war. Merton had the kind of reputation which made him a hero on one side and something to terrify children on the other. Ayha heard the news while watching the progress of the enemy fleet.

" They are moving towards their destruction." Elgar stood at her side in the control chamber. The walls were flanked by huge screens portraying space beyond Amrha, the images transmitted by scanner-laden scouts. The quiet breathing of technicians merged with the soft electronic noises and the hum of air conditioners. Above them, isolated in solitude, the keenest minds of the empire sent their thoughts probing into space to pick up enemy radiations.

" They are still heading towards Aamon ?"

" Yes, your Majesty." Elgar gestured towards the pin-points of ruby lights which represented the enemy fleet. " I have, of course, dispatched our own forces to intercept them. They will engage about half-way between here and Aamon." His thoughts grew cold. " I venture to state that we shall achieve an overwhelming victory."

" Perhaps." Ayha turned from the screen. " I wonder how many others have thought that—and woken to conquest ?"

" Your Majesty ?"

" I have learned much about this Merton." Ayha glanced back at the screen. " He is acting like a fool and yet he does not have the reputation of being stupid. Tell me is it true that no one can read his mind ?"

" Yes, your Majesty."

" They are close." She stared at the screen. " Too close."

" Their flight pattern takes them close to Amrha," explained Elgar. " But they are headed directly towards Aamon."

" And out forces have been sent to intercept them." Ayha nodded. " The usual military counterplay. Amrha, of course is well protected ?"

" Naturally, your majesty." Elgar grew confident. "There is nothing to fear, Your Majesty. Even if the enemy change their plans we shall have ample warning and our planetary defences can blast them from the skies." His confidence grew. " Never forget that we shall know exactly what he intends at all times. If he decides to change plans then his crew will know and so shall we. There will be time enough to adjust our defences."

He was wrong.

Jake knew what he was doing. He knew how to fight against telepaths. They couldn't read his mind and so had no inkling of his true intentions. All they could do was to read the minds of his crew and, since they wouldn't know the truth until the last moment, the information wouldn't be of any real value.

Jake's one big weapon was the fact that telepaths couldn't lie. As they couldn't lie they couldn't bluff. He could.

As a bluff it was elementary but it worked. The fleet suddenly altered direction and plunged down towards Amrha. The defending observers, accustomed to having plenty of time to make decisions which, in turn, were always bas ed on received information, were caught at a loss. Before they knew it the enemy had penetrated their outer defences and the skies were filled with flaming wreckage.

They fought back but they had no chance. Ships grounded and disgorged assault troops. Orbiting vessels swept the skies, the Capitol itself was under attack and half the planet in danger of extermination. Bitterly the Matriarch accepted the inevitable.

Jake accepted her surrender in person. He made a brave figure in his jewelled uniform and, despite herself, Ayha was impressed. Jake shared her emotion.

Tomore's description hadn't prepared him for this but he should have known better. The people of Kund were dark-haired, razor-faced types with a liking for avoirdupois in their women. Ayha was a tall, slender, blue-eyed blonde and fitted Jake's Terran concept of female beauty as if she had been the original model.

"Your Majesty." He made a low bow. "Truly, your worlds are beautiful but there is none to approach your loveliness."

"Thank you." Ayha had learned much about her conqueror including his penchant for verbal communication at all times. Slyly she tried to read his mind and met a blankness which, because she had never met it before, was both terrifying and intriguing. Terrifying because how could you trust or understand anyone when their thoughts remained secret? Intriguing because it presented a mystery and Ayha, like most women, found mystery romantic.

"I regret the damage done to your planet," continued Jake. "May I compliment you on your wise decision to surrender?"

"I had little choice." It was Ayha's turn to pay a compliment. "May I congratulate you on your military prowess?"

"I am accustomed to victory." Jake was deliberately casual. The higher his reputation stood the better it suited his purpose. Just what that purpose was came out during the long, unnecessarily involved negotiations occupying the next few days.

"I believe he wants to marry you." Elgar, alone with the Martriarch in her private quarters, paced the floor as he mentioned it. Ayha was indignant.

"Marry me? A creature of the Gliken? Never!"

"Don't you like him?" Elgar was old but shrewd. He knew the power of young blood and had caught the way she had reacted to the Terran. Ayha shrugged.

"As a man he's presentable enough, clever too, I'll admit that. But marriage?" She shook her head. "No."

"It would be difficult," mused Elgar. "After all, he practically owns this empire now and the Gliken would reward him for his victory. Such a man could take his choice of any high-born woman and any ruler would be only too pleased to acquire his loyalty."

" Are you suggesting that I am not good enough for him ?" Little spots of colour touched her cheeks. Elgar remained silent. " Well ?"

" Let us be practical, your Majesty," soothed Elgar. " I am still amazed that the Lord Merton has not yet annexed Amrha in the name of the Gliken of Kund. The fact that he has not gives me to hope that, perhaps, there could be an alternative."

" Marriage ? To me ?"

" What else ? The Lord Merton is an ambitious man and, as we know to our cost, a military genius. He would rise high under the Gliken but he would still be a servant of Kund. If we could offer him something better, make him a ruler in his own right . . ." He paused as anger washed around him.

" So you would sell me !" Ayha was furious. " So he would condescend to marry me for his own profit !" Her anger rose even higher. "Just like all the other suitors I have sent packing."

" Not so !" Elgar was too old a statesman to easily lose patience but her stubbornness irritated him. " Think, your Majesty, what can you give him that he does not already possess ? Your empire ? He has that. Yourself ? Perhaps, but that is all. In return he can give you Amrha and his genius to protect it forever. It is fortunate that you find favour in his eyes."

It was no way to address a Matriarch and they both knew it but Ayha was too sensible to be annoyed. Instead she lost her previous anger as she considered what Elgar had told her. The old man had sense and reason on his side and arranged marriages between the nobility were too common for the concept to offend her. And, if she had to get married at all, it might as well be to the strange Terran who, she had to admit, attracted her in more ways than one.

Chapter Five

The Gliken of Kund was not amused. He had not only lost a third of his fleet, calmly appropriated by Jake, but had been made to feel a laughing stock over the entire galaxy. For a wedding present he sent half his remaining forces to destroy the new empire of his erstwhile commander. Jake, warned by his outflung scouts, reluctantly left his bride and attended to the irritating business of war. He defeated the invading fleet,

assimilated both vessels and crews and then, because he wanted no more interruptions of his honeymoon, turned his attention to the Gliken. The war raged for almost a year and, at the end of it, the Gliken was dead and Jake ruled over his far-flung empire.

The end of the war should have brought peace. Instead it brought fresh problems. Tomore, still Jake's second-in-command, listened sympathetically to his complaints.

" The trouble with conquest is that it never seems to stop," said Jake bitterly. " All I wanted was peace and a chance to live my own life. So what happens ? The Gliken couldn't let bygones be bygones. He had to want revenge and force a war I didn't want. With him out of the way I thought everything would be nice and peaceful." He snorted. " How wrong can you be?"

" Twickwist ?"

" Him too ?" Jake held his head in his hands. " No. The latest is Grendaleck. He's started raiding our commerce and won't stop making trouble. I guess I'll have to attend to him next."

" And then ?"

" Then I'm going home for a nice long rest. Do you know that I've never ever seen my son ?"

" He's a fine, strong baby," said Tomore hastily. " But I do think that you should attend to Twickwist before Grendaleck. He's gathering a fleet and intends cutting out quite a large portion of your empire. If you leave him too late he will be that much harder to get rid of."

" I suppose you're right," said Jake glumly. " All right, Twickwist first and then home."

It wasn't that simple. He had, Jake discovered, caught a tiger by the tail. His victories had smashed the status quo and his empire was ringed with ambitious rulers each of whom imagined that his time of destiny had dawned. Jake, simply to keep the peace, had to attack each in turn. In this he was helped by his reputation which almost automatically gave him victory whenever he engaged an enemy. Other rulers, seeing what was happening and eager to get on the winning side, hastened to make treaties of eternal allegiance which Jake, tired of war, eagerly accepted.

Within a very short space of time there was only one real ruler in the galaxy and the Pax Merton flowed like a soothing river over once war-harrassed worlds.

There were repercussions.

Ed Harvey, President of Earth, sat at the head of his council chamber and listened to his Financial Advisor. What he heard wasn't news but he still didn't find it agreeable. Neither did he like the buzzing inside his skull. It sounded like a swarm of bees but it wasn't that. It was the telepathised discontent of the majority of Earth's population. As President he was the natural target for complaint.

" Cut it out !" His voice, rusty from long disuse, was still strong. He noticed the shocked expression on the face of his Financial Advisor. " Not you, Joe, all the people out there." He waved towards a window. " Their non-stop complaining is driving me crazy."

" It's getting us all." Winton Burks, Treasurer, looked sympathetic. " Better use vocal, Joe, maybe we can drown it out."

Engles cleared his throat and resumed his analysis. Harvey heard him out with mounting impatience.

" Too many men ! Too much surplus ! What the devil's wrong with the galaxy ?" He slammed his hand down hard on the table. " We must export or die, gentlemen. Export or die !"

He meant that Earth had to get rid of its surplus production or suffer economic disaster. The only thing Earth could export were equipped mercenaries and, for some reason, no one wanted them.

" It's this Merton," said Engles. " He's united the warring rulers into a single empire and forced a galactic peace."

" So ?" Dan Waters, Minister of Labour, was old and inclined to be a little slow.

" No wars—no mercenaries," explained Engles. " The old law of supply and demand."

" He's ruining our economy," snapped Harvey. " Doesn't he know that ?"

" Maybe he doesn't care."

" He's got to care !" The President slammed his hand again on the table. " Can you imagine what this boycott is doing to us ? It's ruining us, that's what. Well, what are we going to do about it ?"

He looked at their blank faces. Burks cleared his throat.

" I don't see what we can do about it," he said. " We can't afford to dump the material and, even if we could, we can't demobilise the Guards. Most of them only joined because they were homeless and starving and, if we turn them loose without jobs to go to we'll have a revolution on our hands."

" Engles !"

Joe looked unhappy. " I don't know, Ed," he confessed. " We can't sell them and, from what Winton says, we can't dump them. It makes things worse if we keep them and I doubt if we can give them away." He shook his head. " That seems to about cover it."

" Not quite." Harvey leaned forward over the table. " There's one thing you left out." His eyes travelled from face to face. " Can anyone tell me what it is ?"

" You can't do it." For once Waters, old though he was, was ahead of the rest.

" Why not ?" Harvey was defiant. " Listen to that noise out there and then tell me if we have any choice."

" No." Waters shook his head. " You can't do it, Ed, and you know it. It wouldn't be right."

" What wouldn't be right ?" Engles looked bewildered. Harvey snorted his contempt.

" Let's not talk of right and wrong," he said. " Let's talk of survival because that's what we're up against. We're loaded with equipped mercenaries which nobody wants. As Joe said, we can't sell them, dump them or give them away. There's only one thing left. Like it or not we've got to use them. If no one wants to fight a war then we'll have to start one of our own."

The war lasted exactly three months. It would have lasted much longer and been much grimmer but for one fact. An entire planet radiating a fixed determination couldn't hope to keep it a secret. Also, to be fair, Earth had tried every way possible to avoid actual conflict. When, driven by desperation, they boiled from their home grounds Jake was waiting for them.

Even so it was a near thing. Had he left an enemy free to attack, his empire would have been shattered into fragments. He swore that it would never happen again. When the conflict was over the President of Earth, a broken, pathetic figure, was summoned to the throne room of the great palace of Kund to offer his total surrender.

It was an impressive scene. Ranked down the vast hall were the representatives of every assimilated world and allied race. They differed from each other in minor physical detail but not so much that they did not betray their common heritage. One day, thought Jake watching them, he would have to investigate the origins of the human race. It could

be no accident that peoples on diverse planets had so much in common. They must all have had, at one time, a common ancestry.

He concentrated on the advancing figure of the President. Ayha touched his hand.

" Poor man," she whispered. " He is terrified."

He had good reason to be, thought Jake grimly. Only the threat of total destruction had brought Earth to the realisation that it was literally yield or die. And it was this man, this lone, stooped figure, who was the direct cause. Harvey had much to answer for.

Jake let him sweat for a while. He leaned forward from the high throne.

" You admit that you are totally defeated ?"

" Yes, your Serenity."

" And you are here to offer your unconditional surrender ?"

" Yes, your Serenity."

" I see." Jake relaxed. He wasn't cruel and the old man had suffered enough. " I shall, of course, absorb you into my empire. I cannot permit the threat of another, unwarranted attack to disturb the peace of my empire and my dynasty. You agree ?"

" Naturally, your Serenity." The President had expected no less. In his more despondent moments he had imagined all Earthmen being sold into slavery. He braced himself for what was to come.

" There will also be reparations. Your remaining vessels will be confiscated."

" The prisoners of war, your Serenity ?"

" Will be offered employment. They may, if they wish, join my forces. I shall employ them to keep the peace and protect my domains."

" Your Serenity !" It was more than the President had hoped for ; more than he deserved. " I—" He broke off as Jake lifted his hand. " Your Serenity ?"

" I shall demand implicit loyalty towards myself and my descendants."

" That is understood." The President was sweating, he was waiting for the catch. Jake waved a hand.

" That is all."

The President gaped.

" Earth will be received into my empire on an equal status and certain benefits will accrue. For example, it is not my

wish to ruin your economy ; ships and men to crew them will always be in demand."

Jake relaxed on his throne feeling a glow of satisfaction that he had done the right thing. Himself a son of Earth he had a soft spot for the home world. Also, his personal troops, the ex-mercenaries he had engaged to keep order in his far-flung empire were all Terrans. It would have been bad policy to have been too harsh on their mother-planet.

Later, when they were alone, Jake poured Harvey a glass of wine.

" The war is over," he said. " Let us drink to peace."

" To peace !" Harvey drained his glass. It was good wine, the best he had ever tasted, the goblet cut from a single crystal. He set it down and examined the sumptuous private apartments, the costly hangings, the incredibly expensive furniture. He looked at Jake, elegantly dressed in fabrics which the President had only heard about but could never have afforded. He shook his head.

" Something on your mind ?" Jake refilled the empty glass.

" Only a minor matter, your Serenity." Harvey's initial fear had gone. Jake was no ravening monster, no beast bent on revenge. He was just a quiet, ordinary-seeming man married to one of the most beautiful women Harvey had eve seen, and the old man was curious.

" You know," he said, " I can't figure out how you did it. Advance so quickly, I mean." He coughed. " I must confess that I took the liberty of looking up your record before the recent—unpleasantness between us."

" Indeed ?"

" Yes." Harvey sipped at his wine and gave a deep sigh. " With all due respect, your Serenity, it's incredible. From a common Guardsman to the virtual ruler of the galaxy. It's almost unbelievable."

Jake shrugged.

" Merton, Master of Space !" The President mouthed the title with awe. " With all due respect, your Serenity, it makes a man wonder. If you, crippled as you are—I am sure that you will forgive my referring to your handicap—have accomplished so much in so short a time ; what would you have done had you been normal ? A telepath like the rest of us."

" That's easy," said Jake. He helped himself to wine. " I'd still be herding cows for the Apex Delicacy Co."

—E. C. Tubb

Several years ago author Rayer had a rather unique novel published entitled "Tomorrow Sometimes Comes," (now long out of print) dealing with the 'birth' of the Magnus Mensis, a gigantic analytical computing machine which ultimately rules the human race. Here is an offshoot story from the same theme but dated sometime after the events in the original story.

ADJUSTMENT PERIOD

by FRANCIS G. RAYER

Chapter One

After fifty years of space travel and expansion, mankind had learnt to throw responsibility for the more difficult decisions of exploration and colonisation upon the Mens Magna. Its resolute judgment, based as it was upon its possession of all human knowledge, had brought peace and prosperity to the planets under Man's dominion.

Martin watched the truck stop. A bit taller than most, with a hard, tanned expression, he stood with fingers looped round his army belt and puzzlement in his eyes. His brows inched towards each other and he drew in his cheeks, frowning.

The truck driver got out and went to the back of the vehicle. There, the canvas flaps opened, and a lean man of moderate height sprang down lightly, to stand with a rifle in his hands as he jerked out a command. Two Errians lowered themselves from the back of the truck. Average specimens, lean, human

like and hardy, they were about five feet tall, and their round eyes were resentful.

More trouble, Martin thought, and walked from the huts towards the truck. There had been no end to trouble since they had landed on Erris twelve months before. Except for that it would have been a good planet, though a trifle smaller than Earth, three-quarters sea, and a bit infertile.

Lieutenant Bowes was urging the pair towards the huts, where one building served as prison. He halted, the rifle ready at waist level.

" Another pair for jail, I think, sir," he said.

Martin read an undertone of helplessness in his voice. The two Errians stood erect, their round eyes bright with intelligence. They had quick minds, Martin knew, and were lean, wiry specimens well adapted to their rather hard life on Erris. Judging from their hand woven garments, they were husbandmen who wrestled a scanty life from the stony soil.

Lieutenant Bowes glared at them accusingly. " They were stealing rations out of the truck, sir !" he stated.

Martin had expected it. Petty and not so petty thieving had been the bane of his life ever since the *Elberfeld* had touched down on Erris.

One Errian shook his head, a gesture learned from men. " We did not steal."

" No," the other said.

Bowes made an explosive sound. " I saw them myself, sir !"

The same story, Martin thought. Bowes was clipped and precise, and did not make errors. But the two Errians had a disconcertingly direct gaze. The ease with which they had picked up a new language showed their intelligence, and there was no clear reason why they should lie, if caught in the very act.

Martin decided he would ignore the denial. " Why did you take things from our truck ?"

Both heads shook now. " We did not."

" No, we touched nothing."

Bowes swore softly. " Is someone suggesting I dreamt it ?"

Martin saw that he would get nowhere. This had happened before, frequently. It was now almost a ritual : accusation by reliable men ; absolute denial by the Errians.

" Put them in the prison hut until I've decided what shall be done !" he snapped.

He watched them go. There was more under this than petty pilfering—much more. If anything was stolen, it was usually of small value. Thefts and lies, when they arose, were only symptomatic of a much more serious defect. The lack of a working relationship between humans and Errians. And in twelve months no real progress had been made. The Errians had learnt a simple form of the newcomers' language ; men had noted how Errians worked, fished, hunted and lived. But nothing had come of it all. The Errians were incomprehensible as ever, living a dozen or so together in scattered groups, and apparently with no regard whatever for the truth. It was no good, Martin thought.

Dusk was gathering round the buildings as Martin left them. Erris was not an old planet, and judging by the lack of deep tilth and vegetative deposit, it had enjoyed no epoch like that forming the coal strata of Earth. Circling a small sun in the Praesepe Cluster, it had probably cooled fairly rapidly, Martin thought. Evidence suggested it would be relatively easy to make significantly large areas fertile. *If men were allowed to remain . . .*

The headquarters set up at Firbey Hills were quite elaborate, but some of the equipment in the *Elberfeld* was of a kind which could only be moved into permanent buildings, if at all. As he drove, Martin wondered whether the plan he had formulated was wise. It had brewed for some time, and the sight of the last two Errians, brought in by Bowes, had made him realise the situation was both serious and likely to remain permanent.

The ship rested vertically on rocky flats only a few miles from Firbey Hills. Martin halted the jeep, got out, and walked to her. A huge vessel, the *Elberfeld* had made the trip from Earth to the Praesepe Cluster in five months. He signalled for the personnel lift, and waited for it to descend.

As he rode up the gleaming side of the ship, Martin had an extending view in the evening light. Far to his left water gleamed, and small sails stood like raised wings—fishing craft. Nearer, a small band of Errians moved towards their unseen camp. They changed camp often, and seldom gathered in large numbers. Birds were calling near the water, very remote. Martin strained his eyes to discern the cause of their unease, or to catch sight of the other important species of the planet, who averaged eighteen inches taller than the Errians, and had

been labelled *Erris Major*. But none were to be seen. Already the sky was growing dark, except for the golden glow where the planet's small sun had set. Other suns of the Praesepe Cluster were beginning to sparkle in the heavens towards the zenith.

Martin sighed and entered the ship, nodding briefly to the officer left on watch. It was up to the Mens Magna now, he thought.

Across light years of space a sub-radio link coupled the *Elberfeld* with the Mens Magna information reception and despatch centre on Earth. The city of the Mens Magna gleamed in the fresh morning air of a mountain slope. Nowhere within a hundred miles was any industry which might contaminate the air or send vibrations through the rock strata upon which the giant building of the calculator itself was founded. Possessing the whole accumulated knowledge of mankind, the Mens Magna could deal simultaneously with hundreds of thousands of separate channels.

As Martin stepped into the interview cubicle on the *Elberfeld*, reference centres in the Mens Magna awoke. Automatic devices infinitesimally adjusted directive aerials high in the mountains, beaming an array on far Erris.

"You are recognised, Major Martin Cole," the Mens Magna said. "Please sit down."

Martin sat, facing the scanner that relayed his features. A sense of awe was strong upon him, as if he were in the presence of something larger than himself.

"We still have no satisfactory relationship with the natives of this planet," he said. "They steal frequently—pointlessly. They lie about it even more frequently. It's the latter that worries me. We have now experienced hundreds of individual, isolated cases—"

The reproducer in the side of the cubicle awoke, interrupting him. "I am aware of the cases. I have them tabulated. Thirty-six of minor thefts. Ten of serious theft. Three of injury to your men, possibly unintentional. Seventeen of entering buildings and areas not permitted—"

Martin let the voice drone on. It was not for this that he had come to the interview cubicle in the *Elberfeld*. When the list was concluded, he leaned forward.

"You are sure that we cannot remain here until a relationship showing mutual understanding exists between the natives and ourselves?"

" That such a relationship must exist is my intention. Logic indicates it is necessary. Subjugation by force is not a basis for lasting prosperity."

" But it is impossible to arrive at mutual understanding with a people who never speaks the truth !" Martin declared.

There was a moment's pause. " Your statement that they *never* speak the truth is not substantiated by my data."

Martin snorted and his brows twitched. " Very well, then —let's put it that they lie so often we never know where we are ! We ask them to stay away from building sites. They say they will. Half an hour later we have to rescue a dozen up to their necks in fresh concrete !" His eyes sparkled as he remembered cases. " They watch us put up fences, and swear with the honesty of saints they'll leave them untouched. And by the time we're back in our trucks they've pulled up half the posts ! There's no end to it—"

" I am aware of these instances," the Mens Magna said evenly. " Your tone is one showing personal irritation. That is not a state in which you can best logically evaluate the situation. If you have new facts to put before me, please do so."

Martin breathed deeply, consciously relaxing tensed muscles. " I wish to have your permission to use our lie detector analyser on the Errians."

There was a long pause. Sometimes he regretted the complete authority of the Mens Magna. But decision and rule had long become too complicated for human individuals. In addition, personal factors could cloud judgment, as the Mens Magna said.

" The analyser is an imposition upon the integrity of the individual," the reproducer stated at last. " As such, it cannot be used except against criminals."

" And aren't the Errians criminals ?" Martin snapped. " Which is preferable : that we find what's at the bottom of it all, or leave Erris ?"

" In view of the difficult situation, I have already extended your adjustment period by one year," the Mens Magna pointed out. " That was unprecedented."

" So was our lack of progress," Martin put in. " We shall make no advance unless this restricion is removed."

" That is your considered opinion ?"

" It is," Martin said.

Equipment on the mountain flashed through polarised magnetic indices. Points were evaluated, classified, stored, related to new information. Computer cells balanced the lack of progress on Erris with Earth's need for just such planets.

"You are convinced no further progress can be made without the lie analyser?" the Mens Magna asked.

"I am sure of it."

Magnetic impulses cascaded. Memory traces lingered on fluorescent screens, were integrated. Reports indicated the Errians were untruthful. Their untruth could conceal unlawful acts. They could thus be criminals.

"You may use the lie detector analyser," the Mens Magna said.

Martin rose, relieved. To use it without position would have ended his career.

"Immediately I've anything to go on, you'll have the data too!" he said.

It did not take long to get things moving. Bowes was ordered to bring the two Errians to the ship. The detector equipment engineer was told to be ready. Then Martin went in search of someone who should be present when the Errians disclosed why they had lied.

Jim Ockley was always a ready listener. His light blue eyes settled on Martin, and did not stray until Martin had finished. Then he scratched his sandy head.

"You're afraid the Mens Magna will instruct us all to leave the planet," he said.

Martin nodded. "It has always allowed this period of twelve months for evidence of a working relationship with the natives to be produced. We've got extra grace, but failed to produce that evidence. The method's worked well enough on other planets—if you can't get things reasonably straight in a year, you never will. That's how the Mens Magna reasons."

"You think all this lying hides something else?"

"I do. What's more, the Errians would eventually have to take their place in our society, if not as equals, at least according to their ability. How is that possible when we can never believe a word they say?"

"True enough," Jim Ockley admitted. He indicated files with a long finger. "Anthropology as applied to non-human species is never easy. But I've never had a situation this hard.

When we landed I thought it simple, and that I'd have no important loose ends after a few months." He sighed. " Instead, what do I find. A people we can't trust. Scattered in groups, but probably numbering a hundred million, all told. And therefore important. Then there is the *Erris Major* species, outnumbered by the smaller Errians a hundred to one, but fierce enough to command respect. I've questioned both species until I'm blue in the face, and still don't know why I can never trust an Errian."

" The lie analyser may show that," Martin said feelingly.

Chapter Two

They went down the corridor. The Errians had already been brought to the *Elberfeld* and one was ready for questioning He could almost have been a human of less than average height and build, except for his round eyes and pointed ears. He now showed every symptom of terror, and momentarily strove to free himself from the plastic bands holding arms, legs and body.

Martin took up a position just in front of him and to his right, so that he could study the expressive features.

" You won't be harmed," he said.

He saw that the Errian did not believe. Instead, the round eyes fastened on Martin.

" Let me free, and I will answer your questions truthfully," the Errian said. " And I will not try to escape."

Martin sighed, indicating the test to begin. If he freed the Errian, he would lie unceasingly, and try to bolt.

The electroencephalograph dome settled over the Errian's head. A light began to weave its pattern over his face. The injected sedative was taking hold, and the analyser officer nodded.

" He's under, sir."

Martin sat on a low mushroom stool, knee to knee with the Errian. The round eyes were glazed.

" You will tell me the truth," Martin said.

" Yes."

Martin glanced at the officer, who nodded, gaze back on his screens. " He's under, sir, and telling the truth."

" Good." Martin studied the stressed face. Perspiration was visible from brow to pointed ears. " Why did you steal stores from the truck ?"

The glazed eyes stared back. "I did not steal."

Martin felt astonishment. A sworn exclamation brought his gaze up. Lieutenant Bowes was red.

"I saw him, sir! With my own eyes!"

Martin looked at the analyser officer, whose head moved almost imperceptibly.

"The apparatus indicates that the Errian is speaking the truth, sir."

His voice was oddly flat. Bowes swore, stepping forward. "Are you suggesting I'm lying—?"

"No, sir." The officer's gaze returned to his screens. "I am merely saying what the machine shows."

In the background Jim Ockley moved uneasily. "Possibly the Errian does not look upon his act as *stealing*. Phrase it differently. Ask him if he *took* anything from the truck."

Martin repeated the question. The answer was prompt:

"No, sir, I took nothing."

Martin rose from the stool. "You must have brought the wrong pair, Lieutenant Bowes."

"No, sir!" Bowes's denial was emphatic. "I saw this pair myself, caught them myself, and brought them here myself! This is the same pair, and I saw them taking stores from the truck. I'll stake my rank on that—"

"You may have to stake it," Martin said abruptly. He flipped up a switch, and the weaving spot faded. The dome began to lift. "Have the lie detector analyser tested!" he snapped.

The officer looked astonished. "It's virtually impossible for it to fail, sir. It's self-checking—"

Martin moved for the door. "Test it!"

At the door he paused. "After testing it, check the other Errian. Let me know the result." His gaze settled on Jim Ockley. "I wish to discuss this with you, Captain."

They walked along the corridor side by side, and entered the personnel lift. Jim Ockley tattooed on its shining rail with his fingers.

"This is getting you down, Martin."

Martin leaned on the rail, watching the ground slowly come to meet them. Darkness covered the surrounding terrain beyond the reach of the floodlights.

"Another month of this, and I'll be asking to be relieved of my command, Jim," he admitted.

The lift touched solid rock. Near the rim of the illuminated area a tall, heavily built creature had appeared. Martin felt the instinctive unease which must have been fear when defenceless ancestors met a tiger or other predator. The feel of the small arm at his belt was reassuring.

Jim Ockley followed his gaze. " At least *they* don't cause trouble," he said.

Martin nodded. This specimen of *Erris Major* was indeed a fine individual, with a sleek hairy pelt under his coarse cloth garment. He was nearly seven feet, and probably twice the weight of an average man. Nor did he retreat as they walked towards him. At three or four paces, Martin halted.

The creature smiled. It was in some ways a chilling spectacle, displaying a wide, powerful mouth with fanged eye teeth.

" You don't usually come this near our ship," Martin said curiously.

Eyes red as a tiger's examined him. " We often come—but you seldom see us."

The words were a trifle ill-formed, as if the language were difficult. All the specimens of *Erris Major* so far seen spoke the Errians' language fluently, Martin recalled. But only a few could converse with humans in the latter's tongue.

Martin shrugged. It mattered little whether individuals of the *Erris Major* species came near the ship or not. But he felt a warning was necessary.

" It is not wise to touch things you don't understand," he pointed out.

The fangs were revealed again. " We shall not do that." The creature backed, turned, and slid into the darkness.

" Nasty specimens," Jim Ockley said feelingly. " But at least they tell the truth. That's an advantage. But I'm glad they're the minority here. I doubt if there's a million, against the hundred million Errians."

Martin walked to the parked jeep. " What kind of relationship exists between the smaller Errians and *Erris Major* ?"

" None, that I've discovered." Ockley got in beside him. " The Errians go their way, and *Erris Major* his. I've never heard an Errian mention his big brothers. Can't say I'd blame anyone for keeping out of their way."

His headlights making twin cones of light ahead, Martin admitted he felt that way himself. On Earth, tigers possibly had their uses. One admitted tigers existed. One could see

them. But no one sought the companionship of them, even if they could stand on their hind legs and talk.

The rocky surface gave way to the lower slopes of the hills. Ockley's mild features were thoughtful. He scratched his sandy head with a finger.

"Have you ever thought that Bowes could have been lying?"

"It had occurred to me." Martin slowed where the road turned among bushes. "But I don't think he has. There's no reason why he should. Furthermore, it's not the first time we've found the Errians don't know what truth is."

Jim Ockley glanced quickly at Martin, his blue eyes glinting. "You could always run a detector test on Bowes."

"I could. But it would be bad for discipline."

Back at the H.Q. buildings, Martin waited impatiently for the lie detector report. He prowled his office, his lips in a thin line, his brows twitching together. This, he thought, was a problem with no solution.

After half an hour a knock came on his door. At his terse word it opened, admitting a girl of a trifle over average height, with close set natural black curls. Martin smiled, his stern face momentarily transfigured.

"You wanted to see me, Miss Jones?" A common name, but uncommon nature, he thought. Alvie had a vivid spark in her brown eyes, indicating something.

"Captain Ockley was telling me about the lie detector test, sir," she said easily. "I had two years in interrogation before coming here, and never knew a detector fail, or give a wrong answer."

Martin inclined his head. A bit taller than most, he was gazing unseeingly at the curls on her brow. "I have never heard of a detector failing," he admitted.

"Then why not go from there, and assume it hasn't failed this time?" Her usual enthusiasm was beginning to show. "That leaves only one possibility—Lieutenant Bowes told a lie?"

"And all the others before him?" Martin asked.

A quick jerk of her head showed she recognised the importance of his statement.

"No, sir. We could forget the earlier cases, because we had no lie detector tests. We could make a fresh start, working only from what is proved—"

Martin drew in his cheeks, but he smiled. " You mean *you* would like to make a fresh start, on the supposition that Bowes lied."

She did not look embarrassed. " Yes. Jim suggests we've only got a few months. The Mens Magna won't give another extension. We get results, or leave. I don't need to remind you it would be the first time such a promising planet has ever been abandoned."

" No," Martin agreed heavily. " Don't remind me of that, Alvie."

" Then let me work on it. The language job can rest. I've enough to go on there, anyway. If I can find out why the Errians lie—or, if they don't, who does, would that help ?"

" Help !" Martin did not try to hide his gratitude. " It would be the most important thing anyone could do—" He halted, as the phone buzzed, and took it up. " Major Cole here."

" It's about the lie detector, sir. We've run all usual tests, and got specified reactions. The analyser is perfect. There is no reason whatever to suspect any of its findings."

" Thanks." Martin put down the receiver, and his gaze rested on Alvie Jones, neat in her lieutenant's uniform, but her eyes sparkling. " You heard that," he said. " Now you know as much as I do. I'm taking Bowes along to the *Elberfeld* now. He won't like it, but it's necessary !"

Bowes's features grew tight, but he did not object. Martin felt sorry for him. It was unpleasant to be disbelieved.

Preparations were soon made. The light began to weave upon the lieutenant's face and the electroencephalograph murmured quietly in the background, watched by the technical officer.

" You brought here two Errians, to be tested," Martin said from the mushroom stool. " Were they out of your sight from the moment you arrested them ?"

The other's eyes were glassy. " They were not out of my sight from the moment of their arrest, until I brought them here and you questioned them."

" There was no interval, however slight, when they could have changed places with other Errians ?"

" None."

" Good." Martin glanced at the technical officer, who nodded. They had established that the two were those Bowes

had arrested. " You saw the pair near the truck ?" Martin asked.

" I did."

" You saw them steal or take goods from the truck ?" This was the point where Bowes must have lied.

There was no hesitation : " I did."

Martin felt a shock. " You know that under lie detector test the pair said they had not taken anything ?"

" Yes."

" Yet you say they had !"

" I do." Bowes's voice was remote, disinterested.

" And there was no opportunity whatever for the two to be replaced by others ?"

" None whatever."

Martin felt complete frustration. He glanced at the technician, who nodded.

" The equipment indicates that Lieutenant Bowes is speaking the truth, sir."

Lips in a thin line, Martin swore. " They can't all be telling the truth—their statements are contradictory !"

The officer looked at him, not answering, and Martin sighed. The man could not elucidate this. Who could, Martin wondered. He struck up the switch.

" There will be no more lie detector analyser tests for the present."

" No, sir."

Outside the test cubicle, Martin gnawed at his lower lip, his brows lowering, his features reflecting his bewilderment. The Errians and Bowes spoke the truth, according to the analyser, and it tested out in order ! An impossible situation !

The deeper he went, the harder it got, Martin thought. He had expected the detector tests to clear up the problem but instead another had been posed. Frowning, he sought the corridor leading to the Mens Magna cubicle.

The door swung shut as he entered. Far away on Earth recognition circuits flashed through their filed information, and the even voice from the grille greeted him.

" Please sit down, Major Cole."

Martin sat, hands on his knees, his elbows out. " Have you any record of an error made by a lie detector analyser ?"

There was a slight delay. " No. The equipment is so made that a fault is virtually impossible, and would indeed call attention to itself, if present."

Martin leaned forward, elbows flexing outwards. "Yet such a fault could arise?"

"No."

"But couldn't there be a secondary fault, perhaps, which would conceal the primary fault?"

"No. The equipment is designed to avoid such possibilities."

Sighing, Martin sat back. He must accept the fact that the lie detector was in order.

Light years away, on Earth, myriads of references flashed under attention, becoming co-ordinated with other data. Vast beyond the comprehension of man, the Mens Magna had recorded within itself all information ever reaching it through any of its multitude channels.

"In view of the purpose of your previous visit, has your lie detector test proved unsatisfactory?" the Mens Magna asked.

Martin started. He occasionally looked upon the Mens Magna simply as a giant question-answering machine, forgetting how it could form questions for itself.

"I have run three tests. All were unsatisfactory," he said.

"So I deduced."

"I have also had the detector tested."

"So your initial questions suggested," the Mens Magna pointed out. "You would not question the reliability of lie analysers unless you suspected such a fault."

Martin nodded. The movement was picked up by the screens, compared with recorded data, and accepted as agreement.

"The detector shows the two Errians were speaking the truth," he said carefully. "It also shows Lieutenant Bowes spoke the truth. Yet the Errians say they took nothing, while Bowes says they did. No substitute of one pair of Errians for another arose. And the detector equipment tested out as in order."

Circuits buried behind electrostatic screens in the mountain side evaluated the data, rejected it, evaluated it as a possibility, and produced a deduction.

"There must exist a factor of which you have no knowledge"

"What factor?" Martin demanded, leaning forward. "I have given you all the information."

"Then your information must be incomplete." The Mens Magna paused, as if selecting data from remote indices. "You

have produced mutually contradictory statements. Yet both are substantiated by the lie detector. The probability of a fault in the latter being undiscovered is so infinitesimally small it can be discounted. Therefore both statements, though contradictory, are true."

" How the devil can they be true !" Martin demanded. He stuck a hand up in front of the screen, fingers spread. "Assume I don't know how many fingers I have. One man says five, another says ten. They can't *both* be right !"

" Obviously not," the Mens Magna agreed.

" Then who's lying—the Errians, or Bowes ?"

There was a slight pause. " The question is unanswerable. I have insufficient data." Stored information was integrated, a possibility selected. " If the Errians regarded taking something as not theft, they would not admit they had committed theft—"

" Of course not." Martin could not keep the nasty tone from his voice. " That was realised, and our questions phrased accordingly. Is there no other possibility ?"

A delay. " Not from the information given," the Mens Magna said at last. " I can only point out one distinction to you, since you have not observed it."

Martin felt renewed interest. " Yes ?"

" You stated that if the lie detector is in order, both the Errians and Lieutenant Bowes are speaking the truth. That is not a statement in accordance with the facts. To agree with the facts, your statement must be modified. I can summarise it as follows. First, evidence suggests the lie detector is in order. Second, the detector indicates that the Errians are speaking the truth. Third, the detector indicates that Bowes is speaking the truth. Your error is to accept an indication by the detector as a positive fact. You must adjust your statement regarding the Errians and Bowes to the following : *Both the Errians and Lieutenant Bowes are speaking the truth, according to the lie detector.*"

Martin snorted audibly. " But the detector is admitted to be in good order !"

" It is."

" Then the difference between my original statement, and your new phrasing of it, is one of no significance !" He rose. It was not the first time the Mens Magna had in some way irritated him beyond endurance.

On Earth, circuits analysed the words and voice. " Your tone shows irritation," the Mens Magna said. " Such is not wise when trying to achieve a logical analysis of a situation. From your previous actions, and other interviews, I am forced to say that you occasionally relapse into anger which serves no useful purpose—"

Martin growled something unintelligible. This gratuitous advice was not what he sought—

" Do not slam the door as you go out," the Mens Magna said. " The act would serve no useful purpose—"

A swish and bang of the soundproof panels cut off its words. Martin stood in the corridor fuming. Both the Errians and Bowes were speaking the truth, according to the lie detector, and the detector was in order. He would have to use the Mens Magna's choice of words, or it would not admit further discussion of the subject. But he could not see that the change helped.

Chapter Three

Two days passed and Martin's hard, tanned face seemed to become more lined. His lips were in a permanently thin line, and his eyes were of colder grey. He sat for hours alone, pondering, or sat in a jeep on the hills, watching the Errians. He went with Alvie and Jim on a long expedition, visiting Errian camps, noting everything because he did not know what was important, what insignificant.

The Errian camps seldom housed more than a score, and none were permanent. Most were of skin tents, blending with the bushes and hills. A few camped in caves. Among the hunters beyond the hills, rough tree houses were frequently found. There seemed nothing of special note, unless it was the great diversity of the camps, and the frequency with which their locations were changed. Hunters would comb a small area clear of game, then move on. Even the Errians who tilled with simple, crude tools moved often, to suit planting and harvest.

Of *Erris Major* they saw little. Sometimes a solitary individual could be spotted disappearing into the bushes. Once Martin saw a group of three, but it was the exception. Apparently they hunted singly, always on the move.

The day after Martin was standing on the hills when he saw Alvie Jones pass along a path below, driven in a jeep by one of the men. The vehicle stopped near an opening where three

Errians were gathering nuts, and the man lifted out a portable recorder. Another language session, Martin thought. Their knowledge of Errian was by now fairly complete. So far as he knew both the smaller Errians and *Erris Major* had exactly the same tongue.

He studied other areas of the hills. From here the tall silver spire that was the *Elberfeld* could not be seen, but many of the roofs of the H.Q. buildings were visible. He slowly turned his binoculars full circle. The landscape was almost like that of Earth, though less wooded. And most trees were small, because of the poor depth of soil.

His gaze reached the clearing again in time to see two of the Errians grab the recorder and run. Alvie was getting something from the jeep, and the man who had driven was talking with other Errians fifty yards away.

Martin shouted. His bellow drifted down the slope, echoed, and Alvie saw what happened. The driver looked round, began to run, then Martin lost sight of him as he scrabbled down the hill.

When he reached the clearing the man was covering two Errians with a small arm. The pair were breathing heavily, and the recorder lay at their feet. Furthermore, one had a decoration of green dye at his chest, which Martin recognised.

" We've had you in for stealing before," he said harshly.

The Errian stared at him with eyes round and innocent. " I have not stolen."

" Taking this away, then !" Martin snapped, pointing at the recorder. " You don't deny you were running off with it !"

The Errian looked at the instrument. His eyes seemed to carry no hint of recognition. He could have been examining something just seen for the first time.

" We have not run off with it," he said. " I had not ever noticed it until you spoke—"

The driver made a sound expressing contempt. Martin recognised him as Dunnett, a youngish man who had his own opinion about the worth of the lying Errians, as he called them.

" I caught him running with it in his hand, sir," Dunnett said.

Martin stepped forward, lifting the Errian's hand. It was slender, five fingered, and across the inside of the palm was a red mark such as would have been caused by carrying the relatively heavy instrument.

" There's no doubt this was the one who took it," Alvie Jones stated quietly.

Martin looked from her to the trembling Errian. " He denies it !"

" Don't they all, sir ?" Dunnett asked. " If you'll let me, I think I might get the truth out of one for once !"

Martin flashed him a glance. " How ?"

" By shooting him if he won't speak the truth, that's all."

The refusal that was springing to Martin's lips did not come. Why not, Martin wondered. Or at least let it seem so. He nodded, saw the expression on Alvie's face, and gripped her arm, the pressure explaining.

The Errian's eyes had not left Dunnett and the gun. Dunnett caught the green dyed tunic, twisting it.

" I want the truth this time. You took the recorder."

The Errian's head shook negatively. " I—I did not."

Dunnett swore. " Confess it. We saw you. You heard what I said—tell the truth, or you don't live—"

The round eyes went from Dunnett's face to the weapon, and sweat sprang into being on the Errian's face.

" I—I did not take it."

The words were only a whisper. Dunnett snorted. " I know you did. I saw you. What's more, if you don't admit it by I count three, you're dead—"

He began to count. Martin tensed, ready for the split second when he should stop Dunnett. The Errian's eyes were terrified, his body sagging with fear.

" Two," Dunnett said. " We saw you, you fool."

The head shook weakly. Martin was sorry for the Errian, who believed he would die.

" Three," Dunnett stated.

He levelled the weapon, sighting it. His finger tightened visibly on the trigger.

" I—I did not take it," the Errian wailed, raising his hands to his eyes.

Dunnett lowered the gun, face expressing defeat. Martin saw that the safety catch had never been off.

" It seemed worth trying," Dunnett said, embarrassed.

They took the recorder back to the jeep, dumping it on a seat. The Errian and his companion were left standing where they had been caught.

" So we're just where we were before," Alvie said as the jeep bumped into motion. " I can understand their pilfering—most natives are attracted by the novelty and wonder of things like that. But why risk death denying something three people have seen you do ?"

There was no answer, and Martin did not attempt to give one. They skirted the hills, gaining speed as the track improved, and emerged into view of the buildings. A little group stood outside the prison hut. More Errians brought in, Martin thought, dispirited.

As they drew near he saw it was not wholly as he had expected. A fine specimen of *Erris Major* was being covered. Jim Ockley was questioning him, and his face lit up as Martin got out of the jeep.

" Here's one admits he stole !" Ockley called.

Martin felt it difficult to believe. Though this was the first time *Erris Major* had been brought in, he recalled.

He passed through the ring of men. They were keeping at a respectful distance from the native.

" He pinched a big can of food while we were working," a man in dusty overalls declared.

Martin studied their captive. " Do you deny that ?"

Angry red eyes glared at him. " Why should I. They saw me."

" You know we regard it as wrong to steal."

The fangs were bared momentarily. " I knew."

Martin's brows quivered. There was a fierce independence about the creature's eyes and features. Martin returned his gaze. " We'll go into this later." He turned on a heel. " Lock him up."

" We've still got nowhere," Jim Ockley stated. " All we've established is that the *Erris Major* don't lie like the other Errians. That's not very important. It's with the small Errians we have to co-operate, if we're ever to live on this planet."

True enough, Martin admitted. The angry eyed creature had been kept captive nearly a week. During that time other Errians of the second species had been brought in, and all had denied their guilt. The situation was, as Jim said, unchanged.

" I think I'll have another look at our friend," Martin said.

Dunnett was standing guard outside the prison hut, and handed over the key used to lock the door on the inside. Martin thanked him briefly.

" I'll go in alone and let myself out when I've finished. He may have more to say if I'm by myself. You'll stay here."

" Yes, sir."

Martin entered, and Dunnett drew shut the door. Their captive stood at the barred window opposite. The low ceiling emphasised his height, and his eyes shone with animal fire as he gazed at Martin. He was no more subdued than a recently caged tiger.

" I'd like to know why you stole food," Martin said.

" To eat. I told you."

Martin moved a pace forward, cheeks drawn pensively in. " You scarcely seemed to be starving—"

Red eyes watched him, and the pointed fangs were shown momentarily. " Hunting has been poorer since you came. I was not hungry, but my mate and family were."

" I see." Studying the other, Martin decided that a recently caged tiger might not come off best in single combat with a good specimen of *Erris Major*. " What would you do if one of your kind stole food from you ?"

" Kill him."

As bad as that, Martin thought. The creature's hairy pelt was visibly bristling under his garment and there was a taut look about him. His legs were slightly bent, his hands curved, and he leaned forward, his wide nostrils dilating with each breath.

" And if you do not take food to your mate and family ?" Martin asked.

" They will find what they can, or die."

" Might not one of your—friends take care of them ?"

Martin saw his jab had reached home. Lips drew back to reveal the pointed teeth.

" If so, I will kill him, when I am free !"

The deep, throaty undertones were rumbling thunder in the hut. Abruptly Martin remembered that he had not locked the door. The key was still in his hand, unused—forgotten because his attention had been upon the prisoner.

The thought was scarcely formed when the creature leapt, swift as a tiger, past Martin in a rush, to the door. One great hand clawed it open, sending it clear with a crash. Dunnett shouted, but was thrust flat with a single movement. Martin reached the doorway in time to see the speeding figure round the corner of other buildings fifty yards away. His hand closed momentarily on Dunnett's shoulder as Dunnett rose.

" Let him go !"

Chapter Four

Alvie switched off the recording machine. " You think it wasn't conincidence that he rushed for the door the moment you remembered you hadn't locked it ?" she asked.

" No. I suspect he guessed my thoughts—or read them." Martin sat down on a high stool near her equipment. " He never tried to escape before."

" There could be something in it," Jim Ockley agreed. He indicated the neatly filed spools in cabinets on the wall. " There's no mention of telepathic powers ?"

The girl shook her head. " Not a hint of it. But *Erris Major* has a habit of keeping out of our way, and until we had this captive I hadn't many recordings of their speech. He was reasonably co-operative, but did not mention telepathy."

" Probably wouldn't," Ockley pointed out. " So long as we didn't know, he had the advantage."

Martin felt inclined to agree. *Erris Major*, usually glimpsed in the distance, was still something of a mystery. The smaller *Errians* invariably remained mute on the subject.

Alvie turned a switch and the sonorous voice of the escaped native filled the room, speaking in the brief phrases of his own tongue.

" The two races speak almost exactly the same language," she said.

Martin noted her tone. " I thought their speech was identical ?"

She smiled fleetingly in recognition of his understanding. "No. When they use our language, translations from theirs are identical. But when *Erris Major* speaks of the smaller Errians, he uses a different name than the Errians use for themselves. The Errians call themselves *mereno*. *Erris Major* calls them *ulatan*. It's virtually the only difference between their languages."

Martin watched her, realising she believed this significant. " Ulatan," he murmured. Somehow the word made him uneasy. " You've got it on this recording ?"

" It's coming."

The deep voice of the captive droned on. Speaking his own language, he seemed to be reaching a state of high emotion. Martin could get only occasional phrases. Then came the word *ulatan*, repeated several times. The tone was a mixture of mockery, triumph, and something that made Martin's blood grow chill. Alvie turned off the equipment.

" As you've guessed, *Erris Major* hates the Errians," she said.

" And he said so ?"

" In brief, yes."

Martin got up from the stool. No possible clue was too insignificant. " Have you an idea of the relationship between the two races ?"

" Each seems to keep clear of the other. A long time ago they probably lived together. Their common language indicates that. But the split is now about as complete as it could be."

The wall phone buzzed. She answered it, looked at Martin. " It's for you."

The officer at the other end sounded relieved as Martin answered. But an edge remained to his voice.

" I've been up at the end of the hills, sir. Some kind of—of preparation seems to be taking place—"

Martin echoed the word, not understanding. "Preparation?"

" There are hundreds of Errians, sir. Perhaps thousands. Some kind of gathering. I think you should look."

" I'll do that !"

Explaining briefly, Martin went out, leaving Alvie to her spools, and Jim to his continued studies of what they knew of the Errians. It would be almost an hour's drive to the south end of the hills, with speed limited by the rough tracks.

The sun was moderately hot with midday just past. The Firbey Hills, where the discoverer of Erris had lost his life in an accident, were a low range totalling several miles. The southmost end gave a wide view of scantily bushed flats.

When the jeep surmounted the rise Martin saw that the scene had changed. He had never before seen so many Errians together. The officer had either under-estimated, or the numbers had increased since.

Martin watched them for a time through binoculars. They were in small groups, without any common focus. Perhaps some kind of celebration or feast day, he supposed.

After remaining half an hour he started back for base. There seemed no need to watch the Errian gathering. All races had their customs.

He had scarcely reached the perimiter of the scattered buildings when Alvie Jones came from her workroom, the animation of her face and the spark in her eyes showing her

urgency. He stopped the jeep and opened the door, leaning out as she called. Men working on a truck nearby paused, looking up in interest. Martin swung his feet to the ground.

" You've something of importance, Miss Jones ?"

" Yes, sir. About the language difference I mentioned."

Martin felt curious. " Yes ?"

Her clear eyes turned momentarily to the mechanics near the truck. " I'd like you to come in and hear it, sir."

" Very well."

He followed, wondering. She closed the door, but did not cross to her equipment.

" I thought it best they didn't know—just yet, Martin," she said.

The expression in her eyes made him uneasy. He drew in his cheeks.

" Tell me."

" I mentioned the words which were different." A deep shadow crossed her face. " The small Errians call themselves *mereno*. The *Erris Major* refer to them as *ulatan*. It conveyed nothing to me for a long time—but now I know—"

She paused, moistening her lips. Her face seemed pinched, and pain lay in her eyes.

" It's something—bad ?" Martin asked.

" Pretty horrible. But natural. It depends how you look at it."

He wondered what was coming. Customs remote from any known on earth were not infrequent, and some were a bit shocking, by human standards.

" And what is—the difference between *mereno* and *ulatan* ?" he asked thinly.

" The same as between—between—" she seemed to seek a parallel. " We've no equivalents. The nearest is with sheep. A dead sheep is mutton. The Errian word equals sheep, man, or person. The *Erris Major* word for an Errian equals mutton, deadman—food."

Martin had expected a shock, but not this. Food ! It was clear, now. The physical strength of *Erris Major*. His ferocity and fanged jaws. The way the Errians never mentioned him. *Erris Major* was a predator ! He had mentally likened their captor to a tiger. And a tiger he was indeed.

" That's not all—quite," Alvie said. " A situation like this one has never existed on any planet I've heard of."

Martin was growing accustomed to the idea. " It's not so unusual. There are man-eating tigers on Earth. Lots of large animals prey on natives—"

" But they don't talk ! That's what is unique. We have two races on Erris, one preying on the other, and they speak the same language !"

He stared at her, dim comprehension creeping over him like a cold hand. " Two speaking races, one eating the other. Tigers who walk erect and talk to their victims in their own language."

" And have some powers of telepathy," Alvie put in.

Martin nodded slowly, but felt that he could not add up all these facts to their full significance.

" I think this development originated fairly recently, as time periods in the development of a species go," Alvie said. " Probably *Erris Major* and the smaller Errians lived together, after arising from common stock. That would explain the common language. Then some change in climate, or the disappearance of natural prey, turned *Erris Major* into the vicious creature he is now. With his usual source of food gone, he began to attack the small Errians. That would cause a wholesale split such as we have now."

It was likely, Martin agreed. A species must adjust, to meet changed conditions, or die. With other game gone, *Erris Major* had modified his hunting habits in the only way possible. But it would be some time before all the present implications of the change were known.

The phone buzzed. Alvie answered it and frowned. " Why do they always interrupt, Martin ?"

He took it. The voice was that of the duty officer on the *Elberfeld*.

" The Mens Magna wishes to speak with you, sir. At once."

Martin's brows twitched. " I'll be along."

He explained briefly, and Alvie compressed her pink lower lip between her small white teeth.

" I'm not sure I envy you !" she said.

" It is imperative that you and all your companions withdraw completely from Erris," the Mens Magna said.

Martin could not pretend he felt no dismay. Withdrawal would mean failure for himself and the expedition.

" Why ?" he asked thinly.

" As you have stayed longer than the usual period, without solving the problem of your relationship with the Errians, it is likely you will never solve it—"

" But you granted an extension of that period !" Martin put in.

" Provisionally. That extension must now be cancelled. As commanding officer, you are justified in asking why. First, I have deduced that the Errians increasingly resent your presence, and are likely to make some demonstration against you, even if they have not yet done so."

Martin recalled the gathering at the south end of the hills, and breath hissed between his teeth. So it was no mere local custom to be observed !

Pick-ups in the cubicle caught the sound. Beamed subradio relayed it to Earth. In the mountain side sorting devices flashed through references, made identification, and integrated a reply.

" It would appear this danger has already materialised," the Mens Magna said. " My first deduction thus becomes a fact. From it, related facts can be found. It is logical to assume that the Errians will show violence towards you. Only two possibilities will then exist. First, you can suppress their revolt by force. Second, you will be defeated and have to flee the planet. Both are undesirable. Contact with all other planets has been friendly. Men cannot retain domination of his planets by force. Therefore the conflict between yourself and the Errians will be useless. It would also be a bad example. Since neither possibility is acceptable, both must be avoided by your immediate withdrawal."

Martin swore silently. The Mens Magna was right, as always. When the *Elberfeld* reached Earth, his command of her would cease. If another party eventually came to Erris, he would not be with it. Worst of all, he felt that some progress had been made, even though no one yet knew the significance of Alvie's discoveries.

" I request that at least some extension of time be given us," he said.

" That is impossible. The original period was such as to allow reasonable progress. None was made. It was also the longest period which the planetary species type could endure without resentment, in the event of co-operation not arising. Data now show it would be unwise to allow any extension, for the reasons given. You must therefore perpare to leave Erris.

Navigation data for your flight out of the Praesepe Cluster will be prepared and given you . . ."

Martin did not listen as the voice droned on. Complete logic was often the death of human hope.

" It will take a long time to get all the men and equipment aboard," he said evasively. " A very long time."

" I think not. There is the standard procedure, in which you have been trained."

But which he had never expected to use, Martin thought. He gazed at the scanner steadily.

" We have been here a long time. We're scattered, with lots of stuff at the camp." He rose. " Naturally I'll do what I can, but no one could promise to tidy up here in a matter of hours—or days."

There was a delay. " Your remark is noted, but its accuracy is not admitted," the Mens Magna stated at last. " As you asked for an extension of time, queried my reasons for not granting it, and would personally suffer from my instructions, it is logical to assume you will endeavour to postpone leaving. Such conduct would in no way prove to be to your advantage, when you eventually reach Earth. I do indeed most strongly recommend that you do not delay—"

Swearing, Martin turned from the screens and left the cubicle. The sprung door swished shut behind him. He was a fool thus to jeopardise what remained of his reputation, he knew. And yet he could not leave Erris with a report of failure filed against his name. There could be no such half-way circumstance : he would succeed, or terminate his service altogether.

Chapter Five

On Earth, equipment recorded that the cubicle had been vacated, and no promise given. Analysing electronic devices reviewed Martin Cole's character, and from it deduced his probable reactions. Forceful, used to success, he would much dislike failure. Having his own opinions, and trusting them, he would perhaps hope that a few days' grace would allow him to solve the problem. But in the estimation of the calculating devices of the Mens Magna, it was unthinkable that such human considerations influence the decision. The success or failure of a single person was immaterial.

Signals flashed from the main integrating centre of the machine, and a communicator in a cruiser near the rim of the

Praesepe Cluster buzzed a note of top priority. The officer on watch heard it, and within moments the ship's commander was in the vessel's cubicle.

" You are required to set an immediate course for the planet Erris, with a view to landing and taking command," the Mens Magna stated. " Detailed instructions are being prepared and will be sent you shortly. From your present position I compute you can reach Erris within twenty four hours."

" That is so," the commander agreed. He was a veteran, utterly reliable, unimaginative and efficient.

" Then perhaps you will give provisional course instructions, then return," the Mens Magna said.

" I will."

The commander rose, leaving the cubicle. A signal flowed from the ship to earth. A query was beamed from Earth to the *Elberfeld.* Electronic devices returned the answer : the cubicle on the *Elberfeld* was empty, Major Martin Cole had not returned. As the reply signal was picked up by the directive aerials and passed into the Mens Magna, devices began planning to replace Martin Cole completely, on the assumption that he was no longer willing to follow instructions. Meanwhile, data piled up, awaiting the return of the commander of the *Silenius*, which was even now going into a turn that set her bow towards Erris.

The sun had just set when the Errians came over the hills. They moved quickly but cautiously and carried sticks, stones and primitive weapons. Their silence was purposeful.

Jim Ockley went to meet them in a jeep, held a shouted conversation, ducked a few well aimed stones, and returned to the camp.

" They're sick of us," he said as he got out. " Most of all they're fed up with the way we treat them as liars. For some reason that particularly offends their native dignity. I gathered it would be safer to steal their wives, if you wanted, than accuse them of untruthfulness."

" That's helpful to know," Martin said hopelessly.

It soon became clear that an actual battle would arise if the camp was not vacated. The Errians gathered thickly, apparently waiting for darkness, then began to move towards the nearer buildings. Martin ordered immediate evacuation. There were some fifty men, valuable records, but luckily enough vehicles to carry them. A convoy of jeeps and trucks moved away from the hills towards the *Elberfeld.*

" The Mens Magna had decided this would happen," Martin said.

Jim Ockley looked at him quickly, his face lit by the truck bumping behind.

" You didn't tell me that, Martin ! Have you ever known it wrong ?"

" Never," Martin admitted.

" Then why did you ignore it ?" Alvie asked from the back seat.

Martin turned round so that he could see her. " Because I was still hoping we'd find out what was behind all this. I was playing for time, I suppose."

He looked ahead again. Though they had recently learnt extra facts about the Errians and *Erris Major* the information seemed to lead nowhere.

The vehicles deployed round the *Elberfeld*, and the records were taken aboard. Half the men followed in the personnel lift ; half remained with the trucks, ready to enter the ship if necessary. Martin walked gloomily among the floodlit vehicles. Retreat did not come easily, he thought.

After an hour a red glow began to light the sky towards Firbey Hills, variable but increasing. The Errians were destroying the buildings. It decreased towards morning, but dawn showed heavy smoke drifting slowly on an east wind.

The sun had risen when Errians began to appear from the bushes half a mile away, gathering to converge on the ship. Martin ordered the vehicles to be abandoned and the men retreated into the vessel. The natives crossed the rocky plain slowly, as if expecting danger, then began to destroy the trucks systematically, tearing off tyres, lamps and seats, smashing engine components with heavy stones. Soon the *Elberfeld* appeared to occupy the centre of a scrapyard.

Groups of Errians walked round the ship, staring up at her unscalable sides. They vanished into the bushes, returning at last with large boughs, which they began to arrange round the stern fins. Looking down, Martin saw that it would only be a matter of time before they could reach the entrance port. He ordered a man to stand by to close it, if necessary.

Deep in the ship an imperative beeping had begun. The maximum priority call of the Mens Magna. Martin let it sound for a long time before he entered the cubicle.

" You are recognised," the Mens Magna said evenly. Its voice was completely impersonal, as always. " Your dis-

obedience of my instructions has been noted, and the vessel *Silenius* should reach you before evening. Her commander has been instructed to relieve you of all authority. You will return to Earth to be disciplined. Your delay in following my instructions has been illogical and cannot be permitted. Your conduct has not been satisfactory for a person having authority."

Martin heard it out without moving. He had expected nothing more. He had been foolish to come to the cubicle, he thought, and rose. Scanners picked up the motion, identified it.

" Kindly remain," the Mens Magna said. " I have instructions regarding the manner in which you will hand over authority to Commander Tadlow of the *Silenius*. All your junior officers will place themselves under him—"

Martin grunted, opening the cubicle door. He well remembered old Tadlow, and scowled.

" Please return to your seat," the Mens Magna said. " I have not finished—"

Martin let the door close, shutting off the voice. Moments elapsed, then the imperative beeping began again. Let it, Martin thought, irritated. Could the man on the spot never have the last word on a decision of importance !

The pile of branches round the ship slowly mounted, and so did the number of Errians swarming round the hull. By midday Martin knew that he could not take the *Elberfeld* up without killing hundreds.

He prowled the corridors, oppressed by the feeling that the problem should not be insoluble, but that he lacked wit to solve it. The beeping summons never ceased, and echoed in the ship. A few hours after midday the *Silenius* began to come in on the radio, giving identification. She would be on schedule.

The pile of branches grew high enough for the more agile climbers to reach the port, and Martin had it closed. From an observation hatch he saw that the relays of natives carrying boughs, bushes and other rubbish were increasing in numbers.

He went to a higher deck and found Jim Ockley and Alvie gazing morosely from a port.

" We'll come to your funeral," Ockley said. " Or do suicides have funerals ? It was suicide to ignore the Mens Magna, and your funeral will be discharge with ignominy."

Martin looked from the port. Far below the Errians were still carrying long boughs to increase the pile. A unique situation, he thought. Two speaking races, one eating the other. *Erris Major*, the predator, able to gain at least some knowledge of other beings' thoughts, by telepathy. The Errians lying like troopers and coming out as truthful on the lie detector. All these facts made one whole, but something unusual, unsuspected, and therefore undiscovered. He recalled a distinction the Mens Magna had made. Brainwave analysis by the electroencephalograph section of the detector showed the Errians as speaking the truth, but that did not mean it was in actual fact the truth.

" When a person lies, he usually knows it," he said pensively. " But when the Errians lie, they believe they're speaking the truth. If I tell you my name is Jack Smith, and you believe it, a lie detector test would say you spoke the truth, even though my name isn't Smith."

" So what, Martin ?" Jim Ockley asked.

Alvie stirred at the port, peering down. " I'm not sure they aren't going to set fire to this pile of stuff," she said uneasily.

Martin went quickly to the port. He had assumed the branches were a means of ascent, to reach the entrance, or otherwise get into the ship. But the Errians were carrying bushes and smaller piles of rubbish and placing them at the bottom of the heap, as if constructing a bonfire.

" You could be right," he admitted.

" They must hate the *Erris Major* even more than us," Alvie said.

Martin agreed. There would be hate and contempt for the race that was once friendly, but had become deadly in its enmity. That hunters and hunted spoke the same language gave the situation a unique angle. A thrill as of discovery ran through Martin. Suppose the hunters wanted more victims, to feed wives and children. A victim could be subjected to great stress—could be offered liberty itself, instead of death, if he betrayed his companions, or told where others of his kind could be found !

" You look as if you've thought of something," Jim Ockley said curiously.

Alvie looked interested. " It needs to be good."

" It could be, if there's time !" Martin's brows twitched, and his excitement mounted. " Is there anything to show if *Erris Major* has a keen sense of smell ?"

" Sense of smell ?" Jim Ockley was puzzled. " Far as I know it's pretty poor. That's not unusual in a species fairly civilised."

" Then they'd lack that usual means of tracking down game ?" Martin pressed.

" Probably, now you mention it."

Martin paced the narrow deck. A predator who had lost the primitive, almost essential sense of smell. Telepathic. Speaking the tongue of a smaller race whose members changed camp often . . .

A junior officer tapped on the door and entered. " A routine report from the radio operator, sir," he said.

Martin took it. The *Silenius* was a mere two thousand miles out, and preparing to land. Her commander requested contact with him. Martin crumpled the flimsy.

" Radio Commander Tadlow that I shall be contacting him in due course."

When the officer had gone Ockley sighed deeply. " Why pile up trouble, Martin ? If you refuse Tadlow's request it'll be another stinking mark against you."

" We'll see !" Martin retorted.

The complexity of half-formed ideas in his mind gave him a sense of unreality. What Tadlow did seemed unimportant. He had no thoughts to spare on him or the *Silenius*. Instead, his mind was occupied with the sudden discovery of significance in pieces of a jig-saw puzzle which had never seemed to fit.

He left the observation deck, scarcely aware of opening the door. Outside, the repetitive beeping of the Mens Magna priority call echoed loudly. Smiling slightly, Martin strode along the corridor, and entered the cubicle. The beeping stopped.

" You are recognised, Martin Cole," the Mens Magna said. " Your unnecessary absence and refusal to obey instructions have been noted, together with your earlier disobedience."

Martin did not fail to notice the absence of official rank, but only a lesser part of his mind registered that fleetingly.

" My absence was caused by finding a solution to the problem which has existed here," he said.

There was a slight delay. " Your words infer you have the solution, but idle and unsubstantiated promises will not help you—"

" It is no idle promise !" Martin snapped. He leaned forwards, fixing a pointing finger at the scanner. " Listen ! If you study my past records, you will find I am not in the habit of telling untruths ! Nor have I pretended to knowledge I don't possess ! You cannot deny that."

Impulses flashed from Erris to Earth. References cascaded. Signals passed from the aerials beamed towards the Praesepe Cluster.

"I agree that your record has hitherto been one of reliability" the Mens Magna said.

" Good ! Then you'll agree I may be able to make decisions for myself, without the aid of a tin-can clockwork adding machine !" Martin knew this part was bluff, but it was worth it. " That being so, I claim that my refusal to follow your instructions immediately was justified."

Electronic references scanned idiom, dialect, and terms of emphasis and abuse.

" Your classification of me is incorrect," the Mens Magna stated. " My motivation is not derived from clockwork, and my primary function is not that of addition. Furthermore—"

Nearly a minute passed while it refuted his caustic description and Martin used it to order his thoughts. When the Mens Magna had ended, he sat back in the chair, his hands on his knees, elbows out. He had gained the point that he had expected to solve the problem, instead of stumbling upon it. That fact, now recorded in the machine, could save his career from the dogs.

" I assume your silence is an admission of my accuracy," the voice from the grille murmured. " Therefore let us revert to your original point—that you are now able to promise peaceful and understanding relationships exist between yourselves and the natives."

" I can," Martin said. He was ready, now. " There are two races here. Both use the same tongue. One is much more powerful, physically. He is a predator, eating the other. He is also telepathic. Originally the two races were friends. A change in planetary conditions, coupled with hunting, lessened and removed the predator's natural game. He then started preying on the lesser race. The situation was unique because of the common language. When game was very scarce, the predators terrified or tortured their victims into disclosing

where their companions were. The smaller Errians often lied to save mates, children and friends. But the predators had an inherent ability towards telepathy, and so survival favoured those most able to use this to find when a captive spoke the truth. To counteract this, the Errians slowly developed the ability to lie, under stress, in such a way that the lie was concealed even from the telepathic probings of their hunters. Errians unable to do this disappeared, because their groups fell easy prey to the hunters."

Martin paused. How perfectly it all fitted, he thought. But how impossible it had at first seemed.

" Your remarks are logically connected," the Mens Magna said.

Martin took a deep breath. " I've not finished ! The same odd mental ability which deceived the predators also deceived the lie detector. This ability is probably unconscious—a survival factor now instinct. When we had any Errian in for questioning, he was under stress, and this defence mechanism operated. Now we know this, we can act accordingly. There is, I believe, an adjustment period. After a certain time lapse, when stress has subsided, the Errians again speak the truth. Their extreme annoyance at being called liars shows that untruthfulness is a subject of special hate for them. It is probably associated with personal danger, stress, and the death of friends." He leaned forwards. " Knowing this, we can now promise a sound working relationship."

On Earth, indices flicked through hundreds of thousands of electronic references. The situation was a new one, but could be reached by the logical extrapolation of known terms.

" And you claim that it was knowledge of this complex situation which made you disregard my instructions ?" the Mens Magna asked.

Martin gazed steadily at the scanner. " I do. Pressure of other circumstances made it impossible to explain then. But you will agree I was justified in wishing to remain on Erris."

The silence grew. " I agree that you were justified," the Mens Magna said finally.

" Good." Martin rose. " You will, of course, have Commander Tadlow informed ?"

" Of course."

" Thank you."

Smiling, Martin emerged from the cubicle. Jim Ockley was hurrying down the corridor. " The Errians are demanding

a promise of peace and non-interference, or they'll make us the centre of a bonfire !"

Martin put up a finger, indicating the need for silence, and carefully closed the door of the cubicle. Sometimes there were things it were better the Mens Magna did not hear !

" I think we can handle them now, Jim," he said evenly. " I've got the secret of their conduct."

He started off along the corridor, Jim Ockley following. Deep in the mountainside on Earth, references flashed, replacing the rank but lately removed from Martin's name. Other aerials were energised, signalling the *Silenius*. Within minutes she was turning away from Erris, gaining speed to reach her original standby point in the Praesepe Cluster. A section of the Mens Magna that had been busily occupied for several days gradually settled to the low hum of memory indices, as the information was stored. All was well with the many worlds of man's dominion. . .

—Francis G. Rayer

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Being a good soldier meant more than being physically fit, it meant mentally as well. Depending upon which side you were on

LAST BARRIER

by JOHN KIPPAX

As soon as the firing started, he knew what he had to do. As he buckled on his equipment, and checked the ammunition reserve of his repeater, he heard the spit-spit of Meissner Mark Two's above the dying wail of the alarm klaxon.

Neither he, nor any other soldier rushing to his appointed post was surprised that the Taganians had tried a revolt; the surprise was that they had anything better than solid projectile weapons.

The hut was in pandemonium, a state of things which was being repeated in thirty huts over the compound.

"Move!" shrieked the Asiatic sergeant. "All you've got to do is get to your posts, hold 'em, and let the swine wear themselves out! They've no reserves—tomorrow you can enjoy yourselves seeing them die!"

Furiously busy as they were, nevertheless some of the men heard his words, and growled appreciatively.

The sergeant caught his arm just as he was going out.

"Kanov! Your brother's on the barrier, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"You two can manage that. I think we can contain them down here, but you've got to watch both sides of the wire, you know. Got that?"

Men were rushing out into the purple night of Tagan, climbing into low trucks and roaring away.

"I got that."

"Good. I reckon that general's inspection tomorrow will be off. You ready? Off you go?"

Kanov ran out and found his scooter, pressed the starter, and whirled past the hutments, out of the camp with its electric fence, and onto the road. Glancing as he turned, he saw that most of the noise came from the western end of the Taganian village.

The scooter hummed along the road; it seemed to Kanov that once again the Taganians had proved themselves fools. To have started a rebellion at this hour! How did they hope to succeed, with no heavy weapons, and no means of subduing the main encampment? It was as Earthmen said—the Taganians might look like Earthmen, except for their slightly pinker skins, but they were no match for Earth troops. Especially, thought Kanov, they were no match for men like himself, the Steel Legion soldiers.

The Steel Legion! He had been in it for nearly an Earth year, now. His elder brother Tomas had been in two years, and as soon as young Ivan had finished his basic training, he had asked to be considered for the legion. He had been accepted, received into that fierce conquering force, and posted to this vital planet, where the inhabitants soon gave way and accepted secondary status to Earthmen. Or—*seemed* to give away. It was not for a Steel Legion man to question such things, but, despite the news which was carefully controlled—for the soldiers' own good, of course—they had heard of the increasing hardness of the Taganians, of little revolts and killings in various parts of the planet, of a new leader who was supposed to have arisen!

He watched the road bathed in his single headlamp as it skimmed away under him. No, not these Taganians. How could they conquer the Steel Legion? The leader had said that they could not; what more assurance could a loyal soldier want than that

He had only one regret, that their father, old Piotr Kanov, had never wanted his sons to go, would have preferred them to stay on the farm. Of course, it hadn't been a bad life on the farm, come to that, but, compared to this . . .

Now he was out of the agricultural area; in a few moments, he had left behind the scrub, and then there was nothing but the brown rock skimming away on either side.

He slowed; he was nearly there. He could see the distant glow of the barrier lamps, the faint shape of the one man sentry post. He dismounted, kicked down the stand, and walked up. Something scuttled away under his feet; it was one of the little rock rats.

"Tomas!" he called, softly.

No answer; a rat squeaked, somewhere.

He walked closer; his treatment and conditioning did not allow him to become nervous. He saw that the barrier was not down.

"Tomas! Why haven't you got the barrier down? Got no sense! Can't you hear what's happening? Didn't they— "

He saw the body lying there. He ran, put down his gun, and knelt.

"Tomas!"

He turned the body over. Oh, he was dead. Tomas Kanov was dead. No plastic surgery, no regrowth clinic could do anything here. Ivan's face showed sorrow, but sorrow which was limited, suppressed.

He took his hand from the forehead of his dead brother, and wiped the hand on his tunic.

He shook his head.

"Sorry," he muttered, "Sorry I said you'd got no sense."

Distantly, the bangs and spits came to his ears. They were still at it. Meissners again. But perhaps they hadn't—

He got slowly to his feet, and looked round about him. Then he ran to the barrier, and wound it down. He looked at the wire which ran off into the darkness, away from the faint glow of the lamp. Put there to intimidate, that's all; not electric, like the encampment fence.

He came back, and picked up his brother's repeater.

"How'd they come to leave that?"

The magazine was full. So they had stolen up on him. Swine! But Ivan did not feel fear. The Steel Legion men did not feel fear.

A small flash of flame in the purple dark, followed instantly by another; half a second later came a flat, double cough.

Grenades!

So, they had grenades as well!

He went into the sentry post, looked at the little viewer, and pressed the "speak" stud. He waited a second, and then jabbed it again.

Nothing. It was dead. There was no communication between the post and base. It could have been a bullet from outside, or . . .

Being conditioned not to waste thought upon things which, of their very nature, he could not solve, he returned to his brother's body. Kneeling down, he removed a wallet from the tunic pocket. He found that he was averting his eyes from the face, and this was curious, for he had seen far worse sights. As a Steel Legion man, he had accepted them, felt little. Why should this be different? And why should his hand shake as he looked inside the wallet, and examined its contents?

Photographs of himself, and his brother, on Earth.

This was forbidden. A Steel Legion man was dedicated. He served Earth, and Earth alone, and all other affections were put behind him.

But Ivan Kanov looked longingly at the pictures.

"I remember that one," he said to the dead man. "The lake looked beautiful then."

Then the picture of a girl.

"Anna thought a lot of you, Tomas. Pretty, eh?"

Still holding the picture, he suddenly leaned close to the smashed face. He gave a long sigh. "Ah. If I'd not had my resolution tablets, I might be weeping now. Weeping is permitted, on certain occasions. But ours is a good army. They don't let us suffer. And some of us aren't suffering anything at all, now, are we, Tomas?"

He took the currency notes from the wallet, and counted. As he did so, he kept looking up, his eyes roving. Yes, he must keep watch. But, also, this was his brother. He could not place any reason why it should be different, but he felt that it should be so. It was not quite the same simple thing as the dying of just another soldier.

Such a thought was almost heresy!

". . . Eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one . . ." He was going to put all the notes back, then he changed his mind. He counted out six, and put them in his own tunic pocket. Then he snapped the wallet together, and placed that in another pocket.

"You owe me six, Tomas. Remember?"

He took the rest of the contents, cigarettes, matches. His manner, as he did so, seemed nervous, like the manner of a man who had not been treated, and kept up to condition. The firing behind him grew momentarily, and he looked round. More grenades flashed, and, this time, he seemed to feel a reaction from the pit of his stomach against their noise.

Now he had his brother's paybook.

"Not got that proficiency test entered in, Tomas." He thumbed through it. "Yes, they got you down here, all right. Every detail. They've got us all down."

Deep within him, he knew that this occurrence should have given him a shock, but he was cushioned against it by his treatment as a Steel Legion man. But he read the paybook as though it was something new, as though acting for his own amusement, perhaps hiding deeper feelings which were not generally permitted. Once, he felt a strange tightness in his throat.

"Tomas Kanov," he muttered. "That was you, wasn't it? Born Minsk, August twelfth, twenty-four twenty-seven." He scanned on "Education . . . primary, secondary . . . high. University! Ha, not for us, eh Tomas? All the same as me."

When he stopped looking at the book, his eyes remembered to rove, alertly.

"The farm, eh, Tomas? Remember what you said when we came here and saw their farms? You said 'that shows what bloody savages they are.' Ah, we had a farm better than anything here. Huh, the way they had to hoard water! We had lots of good water, didn't we?"

He had got used to the mess of a face which his dead brother wore like an evil mask. He put the paybook into his own pocket. Far behind him, there was sporadic firing.

"Damn Taganians," he said. "Never mind, perhaps they'll give me the chance of torturing one tomorrow. I'll do it for you, Tomas." He went down on one knee. "Remember our farm? Remember the green hill, Tomas?"

He gazed on the dead face, saw, in his imagination, the pale mask again, and warm with life. Saw his brother as the expert man at arms, the fearless one-man 'copter expert, the roisterer and good companion which he had been. Some snatch of grief began to seep into Ivan's upper consciousness . . .

Then he heard the slow, light step from beyond the barrier. His ready muscles were in the very act of bringing him upright, of raising his gun, when a soft torchlight lit on his head and shoulders. And as this happened, the voice of the man approaching sounded quite close, soft, persuasive, without menace.

"Good evening, sentry."

He felt his heart give a great leap; and fear was in his voice.

"Halt."

The footsteps halted. Ivan Kanov took a couple of steps back. "Put your torch off! *They* think there's no one up here!"

"What about your scooter? Or did you come up without lights?"

"Torch out! And get your hands away from your pockets!"

"Certainly." The man obeyed; his voice was easy. He stood a dozen feet from Kanov, a dark, indeterminate figure.

"Is that better, sentry?"

"You don't know much, do you, coming up like that! I nearly plugged you." He peered. "Civilian."

"Let's be quite exact, shall we? I am a figure in Earth civilian dress. Don't take these things on trust."

"All right, I won't, don't you worry."

"But—I'm not an ordinary civilian."

"No?"

"No."

The dark figure stepped forward. Kanov wagged the muzzle of his repeater.

"Stay there. This way's closed."

"Closed to whom?" He sounded polite, at ease, even bored, a little. It nettled the soldier. The knowledge of his brother's death was beginning to ache within him, like a dentist's drug wearing off.

"Closed to everybody; can't you hear why?"

"Yes, I can hear. They've broken out again. I must speak to your commander about it."

The matter of fact statement took Kanov unawares. He floundered.

"Speak to—to our commander about it?"

The man's hand was into a pocket and out again. Something white showed.

"My pass." He made as though to move directly at the soldier.

"No! Stay where you are!" His eyes roved up and down the barrier, and took a wary glance behind. Of course, he should *not* have come up with his headlight on.

Kanov said, "Put that pass on the post, over there. Then step back, and I'll look at it."

"Very well."

The man did as he was told. Then Kanov came and took the pass, smartly, glancing up every two or three seconds and keeping the repeater well forward on his arm.

He read.

"Oh . . . " his voice sounded unsure. The man made a sudden movement and Kanov barked, "Keep your hands away from your pockets!"

The man obeyed.

"Sorry . . sir . . but you understand . . orders."

"Take your time, sentry. It's your duty."

It was all there, down to the district commander's signature. He put the pass back on the post.

"Take it back, sir."

When he took it, Kanov had a glimpse of his face. It was lean, very alert, like an eagle. He would be somewhere between forty-five and fifty, perhaps a little more.

"You satisfied, sentry?"

Kanov's ache was increasing, a very little, as the minutes went by.

"Yes. But I can't let you in, not until I get an authority for you."

"Those your orders?"

"Yes sir. When there's an emergency, that pass of yours doesn't count. Thought you would have known that sir."

The visitor still sounded calm, unruffled.

"You're right. But this is awkward for me."

Kanov did not answer for a moment; he walked the barrier, looking back where the sounds of firing still came.

"Wouldn't make any difference if I'd seen you before, sir. Still couldn't let you in. I admit that your civilian clothes put me off."

Again, that cough, not close, but still a terrible sound.

"Grenade, sentry?"

"Yes. It was." There was something about this—this general. You had to talk to him. Why not? There was nothing in the regulations about . . . "But they won't last long, you know. They think they're smart. But we can get help—like that!" He snapped his fingers. "If we need it, that is. Likely we won't."

The man moved his hands again.

"Have a cigarette?"

"No thanks sir. And—I'd sooner you stayed where you were, and me right here."

There was the scrape of a match, as the cigarette was lit. He smelled the smoke.

"As you wish, sentry."

Pause. He counted six rifle shots. That was all there was, now rifle shots. Had they used up all the . . .

"See," said Kanov, "see what happened to him down there? That's not going to happen to me. I'll watch that."

The other said, "You're a good soldier."

The way he said it was somewhere between a statement and a question.

Kanov said, "These Taganians, they're after the magazine. But they'll not get it. Don't see how they can. And we'll have help here, anyway."

As he said it, he knew that . . . *how* did he know?—he wasn't supposed to know!—he knew that he was talking because he wanted to impress the man on the other side of the barrier—*and himself.*

A tiny muscle near Kanov's left eye began to twitch.

"I'm pleased to see that you have some experienced troops here—men who are not easily shaken."

"Yes. Oh, yes."

Kanov thought, he takes it easy. His conditioning must be perfect, permanent. They dose his kind on Earth, and it's for keeps. Whereas, soldiers like Tomas and me . . .

"You know this area, sir?"

"I've been here occasionally. How do you find it?"

"It's fair. You know Taganians though. Same everywhere. They won't learn. And—we *are* good rulers, aren't we sir?"

"You know that sentry."

"Yes, yes. I know it. I've heard all about it, the way we came here, so gentle, and the care and the advantages we offered them." He jerked his head back at the distantly spitting dark. "And that's what they do, when they get a chance."

The glow of the cigarette rose; the end described an arc as it was taken from the smoker's mouth.

"Ungrateful, indeed," murmured the other.

Kanov experienced a slight feeling of irritation. I wish I could be as calm as that, he thought, not calm because of my doses, but really calm, from deep inside. What am I thinking? He has his treatment too, he must have. He is waiting, waiting for me to say something. That's it—he wants to find out what sort of a man I am; if he likes me, then maybe there'll be promotion; it would be nice to be the same rank as Lee Sang.

Kanov said, "They don't seem to understand anything about us, what a glorious thing it is for us to be here, on the planet farthest of all from Earth. They're a stand-offish lot. Sly. Won't be told, won't take it in when we tell them that we're here to teach them to be citizens of our galaxy."

Now the firing was down to almost nothing; the rebels were being beaten; or, were they just holding their fire? No, of course not, they were being beaten! Who could beat the men from Earth, especially the Steel Legions from Earth?

"And they get all the leader's speeches, in translation?"

"Of course. They have to attend," said Kanov.

"One can hardly imagine what can be the matter with them."

Kanov stretched and yawned. He mustn't be tired, he must *not* be. What had the man—the general—said? He couldn't imagine what was the matter with the Taganians? Funny—it didn't have the right sound, that remark. He found himself beginning to yawn again. *He must not be tired.*

"Will you have a relief up here, soon, sentry?"

"Don't know sir. It's the emergency, see. Sorry I've got to keep you waiting about like this, but it's the rule. Must stay like this, until I get instructions."

The other flicked his cigarette butt away. For a moment, Kanov was startled, then he recovered. He took a step forward, and ground his heel upon it.

And still, the dark figure waited, not moving. Kanov said to himself, I know who he is, he's a general, one of our generals. He's in civvies. What about it? Generals can dress how they like, especially if they're political generals. He had nothing to worry about; the general understood that Kanov was doing his duty. All the same, it was difficult for a Legionary to make conversation with such a high rank.

I am uncomfortable; I have never felt like this before.

He swallowed. One had to say something. He cleared his throat; the flicking away of the cigarette butt was the last move the other had made.

"I try to remember all the time that I'm a Steel Legion man. Steel Legion number ten—see my badge—"

"You *try* to remember? Is it sometimes difficult then?"

"Oh no, no!" (What had he said? Why did he put it that way?) "It's not difficult for me; I was well conditioned." Kanov moved along the barrier; was it his imagination, or was he really, certainly, heavier footed, slower, than he should have been?

"But sometimes—I mean, the speeches of the leader are good, but—they can't always sustain us—not—?"

"Sentry!" There was reproof in the single word, and surprise, and a hint of mockery.

Kanov suddenly felt confused. He mouthed phrases, parrot fashion.

"I — I mean, we couldn't do anything without the leader, in him is our strength, we are his children, he — he made us, and all the steel legions like us!"

Now the general was whistling a clipped march tune.

"Ah, that tune! We marched from the transports down to the encampment on that tune!"

He felt relief; it was all right, all right! What had he been worrying about? And what sort of a man was he to admit that he'd been worrying?

The other had something in his hand. Kanov peered forward.

"What's the badge, sir? Why, you're a Steel Legion man yourself! And a tenth, same as me!"

"That's right, sentry. I was one of the original steel legionaries."

Kanov realised that he had been tricked, and that the other had somehow managed to get his hand into his pocket and take out that badge; still it was all right, he was a general, his pass showed that, and more than just a general, a comrade general, too!

"Don't like having to treat an old Steel Legion man like this."

"That's all right, sentry." The voice had not changed at all since he first spoke. "That's all right, I can bide my time."

Greatly unwilling, Kanov had to admit that he was beginning to feel weary. He felt the strain of keeping up this kind of chat. He hadn't been conditioned for the sort of conversation that was needed here; and there was Tomas, dead, lying there. The black pain of that knowledge was increasing, until it threatened to become dominant in his mind.

"Catch," said the general. He had lit two cigarettes, and now he threw one to Kanov. The sentry drew deeply.

"Thanks, sir."

The smoke drifted.

Still, there was occasional firing.

"How does that taste?"

"Fine . . ." then Kanov stiffened. "Here, it's not drugged, is it?"

The voice sounded easy, relaxed, and just a shade amused. "Can't an old Steel Legion man give another a cigarette, even in these circumstances? It's not drugged. Besides, that trick wouldn't work with you?"

"Why not?"

"You've just shown me—you're too smart."

"No — that's right. I suppose I'm not used to the taste. This is a real one. I've heard about these. Doesn't taste like the blasted dung and shavings we get issued with—I—" his tongue was running away again! "— I mean, I know that our glorious troops get the best of everything, but this is—a bit better."

The voice was a little goading, a little cynical, a little menacing. Kanov was past the appreciation of such subtleties.

"You're not complaining, sentry?"

Out came the platitudes.

"Complaining, me? No, we do all right. They look after us. We're the élite, the Steel Legion. Even when we're asleep they've got the little loudspeakers, whispering away all night, the wise words of the leader. He who created us. We know everything he has said; he is in our hearts and minds for ever."

"Ah, yes. Where would you be without him? It's wonderful, all this care. Where would you be without the resolution tablets, and all the other little doses?"

"Yes, yes. You know sir, I heard a rumour, not so long ago, that the men with good records were to be given the continuation treatment, so that they can serve the Legion through three and four lifetimes."

"And that makes you happy?"

"I'll try to be one of those. Think they'll take me?"

"Why not?"

Kanov yawned; he could not help it. He swayed wearily on his feet, and tried to tell himself that it was not so.

"You must have known the legion well, sir. What campaigns were you on?"

"Many, very many. Sardis, Missolonghi, Gallipoli, Zutphen; Flodden, Malplaquet, Austerlitz, Bunker Hill—"

He was puzzled; "First time I heard those names. Were they on far planets?"

"Yes. On a far planet."

"What a long term of service you must have had."

"Long indeed, sentry."

"Were you fighting in all of them, sir?"

"An adviser, shall we say? For some of us, there is no rest."

"What others?" Now Kanov was beginning to hear his own voice as though it was far off. Tomas, Tomas, Tomas, you are dead!

"Oh,—El Alamein, Stalingrad, Athens, the battle of the Moon, all the first planetary—ah, what's it matter, sentry?"

He detected a sharpness in the voice.

"Sorry if I was nosey, sir."

"No. Don't be sorry."

Long silence, Still there was firing. He walked the barrier, weary, weary, weary. They had better send him a relief. Then he could turn this general over to the right people. One got fed up with generals after a time. He walked up to the body. Yes, one got fed up with generals. Why did one get fed up with them? One shouldn't; one owed everything to — he found that he was singing quietly to himself, one of those songs which one never admits to singing. Not a smutty song, a political one.

"The devil and the general, they flew in side by side,
The politicians came and hoped they'd had a pleasant ride—"

"What's that?"

Wrong thoughts, Kanov, wrong thoughts!

"Oh! Sorry, sir. That's just a little jingle the men have been singing."

"Against the leader?"

"Oh — well — I don't think it means much, sir. Didn't you have times in your campaigns where you sang — said a few things which weren't— "

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry. I am sorry you've got to stay here. I'm satisfied you're all right, though."

I'm repeating myself, thought Kanov; why am I repeating myself?

"Sure? "

"Huh? Yes, I'm sure." Tomas, my brother, Tomas! "I'm sure — as I'm sure he's dead."

He took all his attention away from the man on the other side of the barrier, now, and looked down at his brother. When he looked up, the other was sitting on the ground.

"All right if I sit down, sentry? "

"Yes — you stay there as long as you like. Same as — " the words came with effort "— same as he'll stay there as long as he likes." He stood erect for a moment, and listened, and then returned to the slouching posture which he had come to adopt in the last few minutes. "Not much shooting over there now; said we'd soon get 'em down. They were just a rabble. People like that were lucky to be graded second class citizens. Huh! " For a moment, he was stiffly confident. Then he sagged again. But he sounded determined when he added, "We'll show 'em."

The cigarettes were finished. The general in civilian clothes still sat, silent, not moving. Kanov felt the compulsion to talk again.

"How could — how *can* they beat us? Look at me — full of the might which the leader gives us! I'm a Steel Legion man, I am . . . "

He thought, I wish he'd say something. I don't care if he is a general. He might talk to me, he might understand. He ought to remember what it's like to carry a gun on a night like this. But perhaps he doesn't remember; perhaps it's a long time since he did it. But if he was in all those campaigns I never heard of, he ought to . . .

Kanov thought of a good quotation.

"'A Steel Legion man is a living memorial of devotion to the leader.' "

Damn it, thought Kanov, why doesn't he say something? That's one of the leader's famous sayings, why doesn't he echo it, approve? Why doesn't he . . .

"See?" said Kanov. "That's a good saying, isn't it? How *can* these Taganians beat us?"

The dark figure did not stir. Only the voice came quietly over to Kanov. "That one lying there; they beat *him*."

Suddenly, Kanov felt himself crumple.

"Yes. They did." He felt himself tremble.

"He's a mess."

Kanov felt the pain of losing Tomas, now. He never thought he would feel such pain, and he did not understand why he felt it so sharply.

"Did you know him, sentry?"

"*Know* him!" Kanov choked on the words. He sighed. "Yes. I knew him. Knew him very well." He felt the choking sensation again, and he essayed to pull himself together. He did not think that he was tough, integrated, soldierly, as he knew he ought to be. He said, firmly, "Of course, I didn't waste any regrets on him. We're taught not to. I'm a Steel Legion man."

Did the other nod, very slightly? The soldier thought that he did. Kanov began to feel in his pockets.

"What's the time, sir?"

"Ten past twenty-five. Why?"

Thank Schultz, thought Kanov, he's talking a bit more! He said, "I think I ought to take another dose of my resolution tablets."

"Yes. Like a good soldier.

"Last dose of the day. Mustn't forget." He went on searching his pockets.

"Part of the training, sentry. Where would you be without your tablets?"

Kanov's voice held a note of desperation. "My little tube of tablets! It must have fallen out — or maybe I forgot to bring it! I've got to stay here — that's orders, and I've got to take my tablets — that's orders too! Must take them regularly!"

"Have you ever been told why?"

The question upset Kanov. A burst of fire from behind made him half turn.

"W-we shan't be good Steel Legion men if we don't. I must take my doses! And I've none!" His voice went higher with alarm. "I've not got any tablets. Have you sir?"

The dark figure said, evenly, "You saw the grade on my pass. What would I be doing with such things?"

For a moment, Kanov had seemed eager and expectant, hoping for help from an old Steel Legion man. Now, his voice was soft, and quavering.

"No, of course. I forgot. You're a grade one. Voluntary personality change, too. The new men. Oh . . . yes . . . you're worth it. A high officer. Common soldiers like me, we're not worth the trouble. Just the tablets for us; it's cheap and easy." He almost wailed in self pity. "Not worth it for a man like me . . . " Then he stiffened once more, a drowning man clutching at the straw of discipline and loyalty. "Oh, don't think I'm complaining . . . "

"No? "

"The Steel Legion man doesn't complain sir . . . I'm just a plain soldier, sir. I'm not criticising. I'm a common soldier, sir, and common soldiers are so many . . . "

"I don't think you can class Steel Legion men as 'Common' soldiers."

Kanov, all at once, felt free to say things he never knew he could think. He began quietly.

"No? But we *are* so many, aren't we? We're everywhere—in ranks and squadrons and flights and companies and hospitals and nursing homes and communal graves — "

"Sentry! " The other spoke very sharply. "Control yourself! "

Kanov cringed; he felt as though a small, icy wind blew through his bones. He came close to the body of his brother. "Tomas. I want some resolution tablets number five. Please Tomas . . . "

It was like a little whipped boy. "Tomas,—I'm frightened."

Kanov addressed the general. "You, sitting there, that call yourself a general! Why should I stay here, waiting on you, why should I? Show me that pass again! Put it on the post; I want to see if it has the new overstamp on it. That's only been out twelve hours. If it hasn't got that on it, you're caught! "

He waited, tense, while the man rose, and took out the pass, and came and put it on the post as before. Kanov grabbed it, and examined it.

"Yes," he said, at length, with a weary reluctance, "it's there." He tossed it back. "If you're a spy for them, you're smart."

The general pocketed the pass. "You don't think it's likely I am a spy, eh"

Kanov had a vision of himself getting reprimanded for speaking to a senior officer like that.

"Sorry if I — sounded rough, sir. But we've all got our duty to do. I've got to stand here, and wait, and — him over there — he's got to lie, and wait." He said to the corpse, "Bad soldier, Tomas. What are you waiting about for? Tomas, Tomas, Tomas . . . " The repeated name whispered away to nothing. "I've got to have some tablets."

He knelt down by the side of Tomas Kanov, and he began to search. He looked up at the other from time to time, but the general was seated on the ground again, dark, motionless.

"Must look — through all his pockets. I didn't make sure. Need a dose, now. Now! Regulations." The search became feverish. "Must find them, must. No telling what could happen to a man who disobeyed . . . "

He finished the search. His hands dropped by his side. He gave a sob.

"Tomas, you're a bad soldier."

"Why, sentry? "

"Why? He's got no pills." He gave a hysterical giggle. "And he's dead! "

He rose, and began to pace. "How long shall I be without? I've never been without, before! "

Long pause. The shots still came.

"Wasn't he a good soldier, really? "

Kanov said, "His heart wasn't in it. They got his *mind*, they can do that easily, but his heart . . . "

"What could he do well? "

"Ploughing. That's what he could do. Even used horses . . . "

The general gave a small laugh.

"Oh, you can laugh. He used to love horses. Steel blade of a plough used to gleam like a bayonet when he'd finished with it. Ah, the *good* way a ploughshare cuts—especially when it's your own land."

The general heard the voice quaver, noticed the note of sadness. "You need those tablets, eh, sentry? "

Kanov seemed not to hear. "Especially when it's your own land, overlooked by green — really green — hills. Our hills."

"Yes: you did know this man well."

Kanov laughed; the sound came from deep inside him, and there was no humour in it, only a small, growing terror.

"Yes. I knew him. As well as a man *can* know his own brother." The general made a movement, and Kanov sounded suddenly angry, and jerked the muzzle of his repeater. "Now, now! I know what you're thinking! But in our part of the world they still had proper families. He *was* my brother!"

"All right, sentry, all right." The general yawned. "Why don't you sit down, too. Listen, there's hardly any firing. Why don't you?"

"No." The words came jerkily. "I'll be all right. In the morning — when this little lot is over. I'll salute you real smart. I will. A bit of sleep and some pills and a wash — and I'll be fine."

"Surely."

"But right now, I've got no pills, and so — and so —" he wandered aimlessly up and down the barrier, "— and so — I loved this man — loved him, see? He was my brother."

"You are a good soldier. What is your name?"

"Ivan Kanov, sir."

"Ivan."

"I don't reckon you'll tick me off in the morning, if you inspect us, sir? If you don't — then I'll get a high duty mark. I — want that."

Kanov was dead weary. His feet dragged.

The shots came again, like sharp, evil blossoms in sound.

"How can they last so long?" weariness and anger fought for dominance in his voice. "They're all against us, all of 'em! I hate their damned planet, most of it all flat and burned up and brown, and I hate the sound of their pumps." He turned and looked down at his brother. "Don't you hate the sound of their pumps, Tomas? You said that farming here was like trying to rear a herd of calves all on the bottle! Ah, they should have seen us at home, at home. We had *hills*, didn't we, Tomas?" Then he shouted. "*Didn't we Tomas?*" He swayed, and his voice was soft again. He sobbed, just once. "The hills were so green, weren't they?"

He was desperately tired, but, strangely, his voice found depth, and resonance, as though the thought of the beauty which was once his and his brother's had found some new source of feeling and sensibility.

"The luck we had, you, and father, and I. We had the valley land, and we worked it well. But father wasn't satisfied;

the old man was never satisfied. 'Boys,' he said, 'we are overlooked. The hill pastures are for sale. We need them. Then, all we see around us will be ours.' — Remember how hard we worked? But the hills were ours when we left. Tomas, Tomas, are they still green? Come back with me, Tomas, and I'll show you the green hills again. Come back with me, Tomas!"

His voice became very quiet. "Tomas — why didn't you bring any resolution tablets number five?"

Now he was almost in tears. His body shook.

The general made no movement.

Behind him a purple and white flash smashed into the sky, followed by a rumbling roar, which died slowly. He had only to see it for a part of a second to know what it meant.

"Hear that?" he gasped. "That was the magazine! They got the magazine! That's the Taganians — they'll never learn! They win a little victory, but they forget the vengeance that we'll bring, when help comes; they need outside help, but they won't get it!" He panted. The anguish in his voice grew. "Damn them; I didn't ask to come here! The captain was talking to us last night, he'd been talking a bit long, and it was time for our doses, and he said we were benevolent guardians."

Behind him, the flames leaped.

"Benevolent! That's what he said! I wonder if the captain ever noticed the way these aliens look at us when we pass. They speak when they're spoken to, but they'd slit all our throats if they could. *And they're right!* I'd do the same if I were in their shoes. I can see now. Yes, now I can understand."

Kanov went down on one knee beside the body.

"Listen, brother. You've done something for me. I came up here — and found you dead — but all the same, you've done something for me."

He looked back at the flames. Shooting began once more.

"I'm past the time for another dose now, well past. Those tablets, they aren't what they say they are. Look—!"

His repeater muzzle was in the crook of the arm whose hand he held out; the other hand stayed near the trigger.

"See my hand, Tomas. If I concentrate, I can make it quite steady!"

Sweating, quivering, he tried to show that he spoke truly, and he almost succeeded. His uncertain voice held a note of triumph.

"I'm winning. Without their pills and their drugs, I'm winning. And I can see, clearly! Ah, Tomas, you never saw what I can see now. I can see fools, Tomas, thousands and thousands of fools, marching left right left right, for the glory of their leader, for the honour of the steel legions, through all the years of campaigning. Fools, Tomas, idiots caught and drugged and made into worse idiots, you and me and all the rest of them!"

He pointed back into the darkness.

"I'm one who's found out — really found out — about that sort of thing! Showed you my hand, didn't I? My hand was steady . . . steady . . . steady . . . " His voice trailed away for a moment. "They'll want us on the farm again, Tomas. They can't have you — *but they'll have me!*"

His voice had risen to almost a shout. Then it dropped to a low urgency.

"I'm going to escape. Tomas! I'm going to escape to Earth, to home! I'm strong, now. I can see I don't need their drugs, their tablets, their sleep propaganda! You see, Tomas, I'll soon get rid of this uniform, and badges . . . I'll have them off . . . I'll run . . . "

Now he crouched by his brother.

The general stood, and came near him.

"Here," said the general, "this is what you want."

Kanov looked up, startled. Tears were on his face. A small metal tube was pitched down in front of him. He grabbed it, feverishly.

"The tablets! You found some!"

He fumbled with the tube, unscrewed it. His hands shook violently, his voice babbled.

"That — that's what I need! Yes, yes, tha's it! B-be a good S-Steel Legion man — do my duty — "

The shot from the general's gun did not sound very loud. Kanov's hands twitched, and the tube fell, spilling its contents. His body slumped down, his repeater clattered to the ground. The other bent to examine him for a moment, and then picked up the weapon. After that, he wound up the barrier, then turned, and stood for a few seconds, flashing back a signal.

Then, as the firing swelled again, he ran up the road, away from the bodies of the brothers, into the darkness of Tagan III.

—John Kippax

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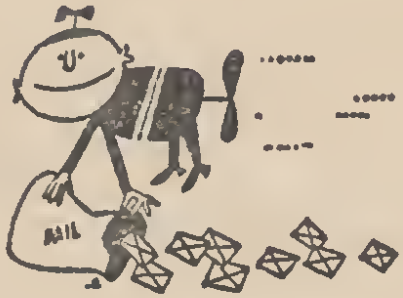

Dear Mr. Carnell,

While sympathising with your correspondent Julian Reid of British Columbia in No. 13 stating that a lot of the ideas in science fiction are stale and have been reworked so many times that readers are likely to quit reading s-f (or rather, this was an earlier premise by author J. T. McIntosh which Mr. Reid was quoting) I do not quite see eye to eye with him over the probable redevelopment of new plot ideas. His suggestion that readers who are not writers but have gimmick ideas worth development should send them in to yourself for onward transmission to some of the authors who could work them into stories may not be so feasible as at first appears. (I'd be interested in knowing just how many such ideas have been sent to you).

A ' gimmick ' idea does not necessarily mean that it will produce a new plot idea. If the so-called 'gimmick' is a development of some presentday weapon or laboratory technique it could be used as a side issue in a story but I am very doubtful whether such an idea would be substantial enough to stand on its own. Much of the development of presentday science fiction seems to have come with the development of the long novel during recent years, especially that of characterisation, which, we didn't have to such a degree back in the days when a s-f novel was a rarity. Certainly, by concentrating on characterisation and setting the old time-worn plots nominally

in spaceships or upon extra-solar planets, many so-called science fiction writers are missing all the true freedom this medium can provide. But many others are using the s-f background as a vehicle for stronger development of characterisation and a lesser development of *science* fiction.

It is this latter problem that appears to be upsetting so many readers who would prefer *science* fiction. Frankly, I cannot see any marriage between the two classes. Either you have the emphasis on science in the stories to the detriment of the characters (either cardboard or non-existent as in Hoyle's book *The Black Cloud*) or else you have sound characterisation and warm human emotions to the detriment of science as such but with the scientific concepts very much in the background. In other words the 'straight' novel. Doubtless someone will find the exception to the rule but I reckon they will have to go back a long way in the history of science fiction. Probably to the 1930's when characterisation was just beginning to emerge from the hardbacked shell of science which Hugo Gernsback hedged it around with.

To fill your three magazines—*New Worlds*, *Science Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Adventures*—every month must be a difficult task, and we cannot expect Clarke or Wyndham quality with every story. What is disheartening is the growing trend of stories inferring that Man is the centre of the universe —the kind we turn to science fiction to avoid. Witchcraft (with the inference that it has some form of scientific basis), financial juggling and politics, sex and sadism in spaceships indistinguishable from tramp steamers at sea (I recently read a copy of an American magazine, now some years old, which was *packed* with sexy stories of this type—one story by a prominent American writer was positively *revolting*). There seems to have been practically no attempt to follow up the path of true science fiction in recent years. By this I mean the postulation of some abnormal event or environment outside all experience but within possibility and the weaving of that narrative in which the principal character *is* that abnormality. Often it is only by using relevant scientific fact that the author can extract the full measure of entertainment from his theme.

Basically, I think you are on the right lines with *Science Fiction Adventures* although some of the recent stories have been singularly empty of any sustained plotting ; on the other hand they have somehow begun to bridge the gap between the presentday clever-clever type of story and that left vacant in

1940 when World War II turned our values upside down. The pre-war stories provided that much-vaunted ' sense of wonder ' which disappeared after 1946 and I estimate the possibilities of SFA sparking a similar sense of wonderment in newer and younger readers very high. Certainly, there has been an enormous improvement in the story values since you ceased to become a reprint of an American magazine with your sixth issue.

In particular, stories which point up this trend of improvement are : the two Wynne Whiteford yarns, " Shadow Of The Sword " and " Distant Drum " in Nos. 6 and 8 ; "Occupation: Warrior," by James White in No. 7 ; E. C. Tubb's "Galactic Destiny" in No.10 (that was one of his best in recent years) ; Robert Presslie's " The Savage One " in No. 11 and Kenneth Bulmer's " The Halting Hand " in No. 12. Oh, and *of course*, James White's " Deadly Litter " in No. 13—this was one of the most interesting new approaches to plotting I have come across for some years and points up my earlier remarks about plots in general. Unfortunately, Mr. White is not apparently capable of producing more than a good average standard of writing although his plots are usually outstanding.

Derek Oldfield,
Peterborough.

(*To answer your query, Mr. Oldfield : unfortunately Mr. Reid's suggestion in No.* 13 *produced no replies or suggestions at all, although I think that he had a good basic idea there.—Ed.*)

Dear Mr. Carnell,

It was with considerable surprise and some little pleasure that I suddenly saw the once familiar logo of *Science Fiction Adventures* on a local newsstand recently but my surprise was even greater when I found, upon buying a copy, that the magazine was now printed and published in England. Whereas when I originally bought it here it was an American magazine edited by Larry Shaw. I have since found out that you started by publishing a British reprint edition and then, when the American edition folded, continued to publish the magazine with new stories by British writers.

This must be something unique in the annals of science fiction publishing, surely ?

After reading your July/August issue (No. 15) however, I must say how much I liked all the stories although your policy seems to be somewhat different from the old SFA. Different inasmuch as although you still have the action-adventure type of plot there seems to be something more mature about your approach to these themes. Nelson Sherwood's "The Dedicated Ones" had a novel twist to the central character idea with his Colonel Bill Ramsden as a repaired Earthman in the form of a centaur. This rather brought back nostalgic memories of Neil R. Jones's old 'Professor Jameson' stories in *Amazing Stories* during the middle 30's. Maybe Mr. Sherwood will produce another story with Ramsden in the leading role.

Surprisingly, the story I liked best in the issue was the short by Brian W. Aldiss "Original Sinner." Aldiss has a peculiar style all his own which makes his stories more memorable than the run-of-the-mill stuff, particularly those appearing in our own American magazines. Like it is easy to remember a Bradbury or Sturgeon yarn. I recently read the Aldiss collection of stories published here by Signet and titled "No Time Like Tomorrow" and thought them as outstanding as the Arthur Clarke stories in recent years although in a different manner. It is good to see such new writers developing in England and appearing over here.

I notice that you don't go in for art work inside the mag very much so will refrain from criticising what little there is as personally I would rather have all stories.

Keep up the good work !

Carl Frohmayer,
Brooklyn, New York.

Dear Sir,

It was with considerable pleasure that I found your two magazines, *Science Fiction Adventures* and *Science Fantasy* on sale over here and to find that the stories in them were at least comparable to many of those published in American science fiction magazines. In fact, I found *Science Fantasy* quite unique insofar as there does not appear to be a magazine being published on the North American continent devoted to the fantasy side of science fiction and the stories in your magazine fill a needed gap.

Your publishing name, Nova Publications, rang a bell with me—weren't you the company who produced a magazine entitled *New Worlds* which was distributed over here about four years ago ? At the time I thought this particular magazine

vastly superior to the main American magazines which seemed to be getting more and more in a rut at that time although some of them have improved a little since then. I missed *New Worlds* when it failed to appear on the stand here and assumed that it had ceased publication, but a reference by yourself in the current issue which has just arrived here seems to indicate that the magazine is still alive.

Anyhow, best wishes for the continued success of your magazines. . .

D. H. Lewis,
Toronto, Ontario.

(*Yes, we were and still are the publishers of* New Worlds Science Fiction, *which is still very much alive and, incidentally, received an award from the World S-F Convention in* 1957 *as the Best British S-F Magazine. A prolonged shipping strike here in* 1956 *successfully killed the Canadian edition of that magazine. However, it will be back on the North American continent in October with its* 99*th issue—just in time for you to make sure of obtaining the All-Star* 100*th issue in November. If you like the existing two magazines, as you apparently do, then you will like* New Worlds *even more so.—Ed.*)

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